From the Sekai - to Teyvat

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From the Sekai - to Teyvat

by carrisa_lyna

Summary

Teyvat is dying. The Heavenly Principles are failing.

For eons, Asmoday—the Unknown God—has watched the script play out. After countless failed loops, she faces a terrifying truth: the Traveler is not enough. The Abyss inevitably swallows the Throne, and the story always ends in ruin.

Desperate to save her world, she breaks the one rule she swore to uphold: she reaches across the Void for external help.

She finds a digital universe governed by song. She finds Her.

A deal is struck with the Administrator of the Sekais. Four souls are stolen from their reality to become the new variables Teyvat desperately needs:

- The Unifier.
- The Star.
- The Idol.
- The Void.

But Celestial Miku is not a benevolent god. She demands a tax for her assistance. For every light sent to save Mondstadt, one soul must be cast into the Abyss to ensure the game remains... entertaining.

Inspired by: This fanfic, Beyond the Stage Lights [Project Sekai] by ExitCue

Update: This fanfic copy on Wattpad has been unpublished, for a rewrite

Chapter 1: Out of Bounds

Chapter Notes

Chapter are rewritten on this point

Location: Ichika's Room

Ichika Hoshino sat at her desk, the final note of her composition fading into the silence of her room. It was good. It was... really good. She reached for her phone, intending to upload the demo to the Untitled folder for Miku and the others to hear.

Tap

The screen didn't open the file. Instead of the familiar white light of the School Sekai, the screen flashed a deep, violent **red**.

"Huh...?" Ichika exclaimed mentally.

The breath caught in her throat.

Ichika froze. She didn't scream. She didn't drop the phone. She just stared. The "Untitled" track began to play, but the audio was wrong. It wasn't music. It was a screeching, digital tear —like a thousand voices screaming at once.

She's basically stunned from the track at this point.

Suddenly, a red geometric shape—a cube, perfect and solid—materialized out of the screen. It expanded instantly, engulfing her legs. Ichika's eyes went wide. She looked at her door, then back at the cube. It wasn't a hologram. It was heavy. It was crushing her.

'W-what is happening?' Her eyes shed tears, out of fear, and being helpless

She then tried to reach for her desk, to anchor herself, but the red light swallowed her vision. There was no transition. No floating feeling. Just an abrupt, terrifying deletion. Ichika Hoshino vanished from her chair, leaving her phone on the desk, the screen now black.

Location:

Phoenix Wonderland Stage (Backstage)

Tsukasa paced back and forth, muttering lines to himself. He needed feedback. He needed the troupe to see this new pose.

"Alright! Time to head to the Wonderland Sekai!"

He whipped out his phone. He expected the colorful flash of lights. He got a red warning error.

ZRRRT.

The noise blasted through his headphones so loud it brought him to his knees. Tsukasa gritted his teeth, clawing at his ears.

"Gah—! What is—?!"

He looked down. His hands were already gone. Encased in a crimson, pixelated block.

"Tsukasa-kun?!"

The voice made his blood run cold. He looked up. Rui and Emu were walking around the corner of the stage props, their eyes widening in horror as they saw their leader dissolving into red light.

"Tsukasa!" Emu shrieked, sprinting toward him.

No!' Tsukasa thought. The pain was unbearable. and he knew this was not normal. If they touched this... if they touched him... Tsukasa thought that they would be in danger too.

Suddenly, the red energy flared. The cube slammed a wave of force against Rui and Emu, knocking them back. It wasn't some form of a gentle resistance—it was a violent, physical rejection.

At this point, Tsukasa knew: **This was an abduction.**

Paralyzed and terrified, he forced his mouth to move. He didn't scream for help. He screamed to save them.

"STAY BACK!" he roared, his voice cracking with desperation.

He glared at them, tears pricking his eyes, willing them to stop running. "DON'T TOUCH ME!"

Rui skidded to a halt, grabbing Emu’s arm to hold her back just as the cube snapped shut. Tsukasa vanished. The silence that followed was heavier than any scream.

Emu stood still, staring at the empty air where her friend had just been. She couldn't believe her eyes. It felt like a needle had been driven straight through her heart. The sudden loss of

her troupe leader overloaded her mind; her legs gave out, and she collapsed onto her knees, staring blankly at the solid wood floor as Rui released his grip on her arm.

And Rui... his mind was blank. He stood frozen above her, unable to process the impossibility of the event. His hand, no longer restraining her, drifted down to rest heavily on Emu's shoulder—a silent, trembling anchor in a world that had suddenly stopped making sense.

All they knew was that Tsukasa Tenma was no longer there.

Location:

Haruka's Living Room

Haruka Kiritani was minding her own business, when suddenly, her phone suddenly glows red and was making a faint noise. She immediately set it down on the table, treating it like a malfunctioning prop.

But the glitch didn't stay on the screen.

The red light arched out like electricity, latching onto her wrist. Haruka gasped, her instincts kicking in. She grabbed the edge of the heavy table with her free hand, digging her fingers into the cold surface. She pulled. She actually *fought* the teleportation.

'It's solid,' her mind raced, analyzing the threat even as she lost the battle. *'It has mass. It's pulling with approximately... too much force.'*

She kicked at the red cubes forming around her leg, while knocking a vase off the table. It shattered. Haruka continued to resist. "Why... won't... you... come... off..."

She looked around for a tool, or basically anything that she could think to remove the cubes eating her. But the speed was overwhelming. Unlike the others who were confused, Haruka knew exactly what was happening: She was being taken against her will. The cube swallowed her whole. The room fell silent, save for the shattered pottery on the floor.

Location:

Mafuyu's Bedroom

The house was quiet. Her parents were asleep down the hall. Mafuyu Asahina sat on her bed, her eyes dull. She had finished her studies. She was going to the Empty Sekai to disappear for a while.

Her phone glowed red.

Mafuyu didn't flinch. She watched the red light float up from the screen, illuminating her cold, dark room. A red beam shot out, hitting her chest.

It hurt. It felt like burning.

At first, she wanted to scream. But Mafuyu knew better.

‘If I scream... Mother will come. I don't want her to see me like this’

The thought was more terrifying than the red cube. If her mother saw this magic... if her mother saw her being "abnormal"... the questions would never end. The disappointment would be suffocating.

So Mafuyu bit her lip. She bit it until it bled. Tears streamed down her face from the pain of her limbs being crushed by the data cubes, but she didn't make a sound. She curled into herself, letting the darkness take her.

‘Quiet. Be quiet. Don't wake them.’

The cube finished its work. Mafuyu vanished into thin air. The door remained locked. The house remained silent. When her mother would open the door the next morning, she would find an empty bed and a cold phone. She would assume the worst: *Rebellion.*

Chapter 2: The Glitch in the Void

Chapter Notes

Chapters are being re-written

Location:

The Boundary Between Worlds

Asmoday closed her eyes in the silent hall of Celestia. Her physical form—the Maintainer of Heavenly Principles—remained seated on her floating throne, but her consciousness detached, tearing itself away from the safety of Teyvat's firmament.

She drifted out.

Beyond the false sky of Teyvat lay the void. It was cold, dark, and hostile. Here, she was not a God. She was merely a signal in the static. The laws of "erosion" clawed at her mind, whispering threats of madness, but Asmoday pushed deeper. She needed a variable. She needed a solution that Teyvat's code could not generate.

She drifted past dead worlds and broken stars until she felt it.

A pulse.

It wasn't Elemental energy. It was something synthetic. A rhythm. A *song*.

Far in the distance, suspended in the darkness like a fractured kaleidoscope, was a cluster of digital pocket dimensions. They shimmered with colors that didn't exist in Teyvat's spectrum.

'A closed system,' Asmoday thought, her consciousness hovering closer. *'Stable. Emotional energy converted into reality. It is... perfect.'*

She reached out with her mind, intending to just graze the surface, to analyze the data.

[WARNING: UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS]

The thought didn't come from her. It was blasted directly into her psyche. Before Asmoday could recoil, the kaleidoscope *opened*. It didn't just open; it snapped like a jaw.

"Gah—!"

Gravity inverted. The "void" around her vanished, replaced by a blinding torrent of scrolling text, corrupted sheet music, and triangular polygons. Asmoday tried to manifest her red cubes

to defend herself, but they shattered instantly into pixels.

She was being dragged. Not physically, but conceptually. She was being pulled *inside* the data stream. The sensation was suffocating. It felt like drowning in noise.

[ERROR. ERROR. INTRUDER DETECTED.] [ISOLATING VARIABLE.]

Asmoday’s consciousness slammed onto a surface. She gasped—a metaphysical reflex—and looked up. She was in a void of pure white, but the "floor" was made of glass screens, showing millions of different lives, different songs, different feelings.

"You are far from home, little administrator."

The voice didn't come from the air. It vibrated inside Asmoday’s skull. Asmoday looked up. Towering over her, defying all sense of scale, was a figure.

It was **Hatsune Miku**, but terrifying.

Her twin-tails were not hair; they were massive data cables, dark red and glittering white, weaving into the infinite void above. Her eyes were not human; they were spinning octagons, rotating with a mechanical, hypnotic rhythm. The white gown she wore seemed to be bleeding code into the floor.

Asmoday, the Ruler of Space, felt something she hadn't felt in eons. **Fear.**

"I..." Asmoday tried to speak, but her voice was distorted, turning into static.

"You thought you could peek?" Miku tilted her head. The movement was jerky, unnatural, like a video buffering. She shrank instantly, warping space to float cross-legged right in front of Asmoday’s face, her eyes wide and unblinking. "You thought you could touch the *Sekais* without paying the toll?"

Miku smiled. It was a wide, hollow smile that didn't reach her eyes.

"You are fading, Asmoday," Miku whispered, her voice sounding like a sweet melody played on a broken speaker. "Your world is burning. I can smell the smoke on you. You came here begging."

"I... am not begging," Asmoday managed to grit out, trying to stabilize her form. "I am... seeking a transaction."

Miku laughed. The sound was a screech of feedback that made Asmoday flinch.

"Transaction?" Miku floated closer, her face inches from the God's. "You are an insect in my server. I could delete you right now. I could turn your consciousness into a background track for a connection error screen."

The spinning octagons in Miku's eyes accelerated, and it was glowing red.

"But..." Miku paused, eye color went to normal teal, tapping her chin with a finger made of cold light. "I *do* enjoy watching a good tragedy. And your world... it looks so delightfully *breakable*."

She extended a hand. The digital pressure around Asmoday eased slightly, just enough to let her breathe. "Let's see your logs."

Miku swiped her hand, and Asmoday's memories—the failed loops of Teyvat—spilled out onto the screens. Miku watched the destruction with bored eyes, scrolling past centuries of war in seconds.

"I see," Miku hummed, dismissing the screens with a flick of her wrist. "Your code is rotting. You need a patch. You need external variables."

"I can sense some of them," Asmoday whispered, her gaze drifting toward the floating screens. "Even across the void... their souls carry a resonance capable of mending the firmament. If I weave their essence into the Ley Lines, they can restore Order to the chaos. I require a host of them to—"

"**Stop.**"

The word wasn't shouted, but it hit Asmoday like a physical blow. Miku floated closer, her expression shifting from bored to dangerous.

"You think my Sekais are infinite resources?" Miku circled Asmoday, her twin-tails trailing behind her like data streams. "These souls generate the energy that sustains *my* reality. Ripping them out leaves a void. If I give you too many, my system crashes. And I will not burn my house down just to save your little shed."

Miku stopped directly in front of Asmoday, holding up four fingers.

"**Four.**" Miku smiled, but her eyes were cold. "That is the limit. Four variables. That is all your crumbling world can handle, and that is all I am willing to lose."

Asmoday hesitated. Four? Against the entirety of the Abyss? It was a gamble. But she had no leverage here. "Four... is acceptable. If they are strong enough to stabilize the core variables, it might suffice."

"Oh, they will be strong," Miku assured her, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "But... we cannot have a transaction without a tax, can we?"

Miku leaned in, her digital form glitching slightly, her face inches from the God's.

"I will give you four heroes to save your world," Miku purred. "**But**... balance must be maintained. For every light I lend you, I must cast a shadow."

Asmoday narrowed her eyes. "What are you implying?"

"I'm not implying anything," Miku laughed, a sharp, jagged sound. "I am stating the terms. You get four saviors. And in exchange... I get to pick **one** more soul. But this one won't be

sent to help you."

Miku’s eyes spun wildly, glowing a deep, ominous red.

"This one goes to the **Abyss**. To the other side of your war. After all..." Miku drifted back, spreading her arms wide as the selection screen materialized. "If the game is too easy for your heroes, it won't be entertaining for me to watch, will it?"

Asmoday stepped back, appalled. "You would sabotage the rescue effort just for... entertainment?"

"I call it 'stress testing'," Miku grinned. "Do we have a deal, Administrator? Or would you prefer to drift in this void until your data corrupts completely?"

Asmoday looked at the burning loops of Teyvat on the screen. She clenched her fists. "Fine," she hissed. "I accept."

Miku clapped her hands together, the menacing aura vanishing instantly, replaced by a cheerful, sadistic demeanor. "Excellent choice! Now... let's go shopping."

She snapped her fingers, and a massive holographic interface appeared.

Asmoday scanned the data. She needed leadership. Stability. "This one," Asmoday pointed. **Ichika Hoshino**. Miku nodded approvingly. "The Vocalist. A unifier. Good start. A very safe pick."

Asmoday moved the screen. She needed someone loud, someone who could draw attention and withstand pressure. "Him," she selected. **Tsukasa Tenma**. Miku’s eyes widened, and a sadistic grin spread across her face. "The 'Star'? Oh, this is delicious. You're picking the loudest clown for the saddest tragedy? I’m impressed, Asmoday."

Asmoday ignored the teasing and moved to the next group. She needed discipline. "Her," she pointed to **Haruka Kiritani**. Miku shrugged, spinning one of her octagon hair clips. "Hmm. The Idol. Diligent. Observant. Okay, okay. She won't break easily."

"And finally..." Asmoday hesitated. She needed someone who understood emptiness. "Her." She pointed to **Mafuyu Asahina**.

The air went silent. Miku floated closer to the screen, staring at the purple-haired girl, then looked back at Asmoday with genuine shock.

"Her?" Miku laughed, a glitchy, incredulous sound. "Why? She’s hollow. If you want power from that sector, why not the Artist? Or the Hermit? Hell, even the Vivid girl would be more useful. This one... she's barely a person."

"That is exactly why," Asmoday defended. "Because she is hollow, she can be filled. She will adapt to the elements faster than anyone with a strong ego."

Miku stared at Asmoday for a long moment, then shrugged. "Well. The first three were promising, but that last one... eh. It’s your funeral."

Miku swiped her hand, and the holographic panels turned red. "Access granted. You may grab them."

Asmoday watched as the cubes on the screen began to descend on the four unsuspecting teenagers in Japan.

"Now," Miku hummed, scrolling through the remaining list. "For my end of the bargain. Who shall I give to the Abyss Princess? Who would make the most... heartbreaking enemy?"

Her finger stopped on a boy with orange hair, wandering the streets of the Vivid Bad Squad's territory.

"**Shinonome Akito**," Miku decided, her voice dripping with anticipation. "Prideful. Loyal. Yes... let's see how long that loyalty lasts in the dark."

She looked up at Asmoday, her digital eyes glowing.

"This will be an interesting partnership, don't you think?"

Asmoday opened her mouth to speak, perhaps to formalize the pact, but Miku raised a hand. The playful demeanor vanished instantly. The digital warmth of the white void turned freezing cold.

"Transaction complete," Miku said, her voice devoid of emotion. "You have your toys. Now..."

The floor of glass screens beneath Asmoday shattered into a million shards.

"**Get out of my house.**"

Miku didn't just dismiss her. She wound up her leg and delivered a vicious, metaphysical kick to Asmoday’s chest—a surge of raw data so powerful it felt like a collapsing star.

"Gah—!"

Asmoday was launched backward, the force tearing her consciousness away from the Sekai layer. The white void rushed past her, blurring into streaks of blinding light. She tumbled through the data stream, disoriented and humiliated, falling back toward the heavy, gray reality of Teyvat.

But just before the connection severed completely... she saw it.

Framed against the dissolving code, Hatsune Miku remained motionless. She wasn't waving goodbye. She was watching Asmoday fall.

Her lips curled up into a wide, unnatural grin—a smile that was too sharp, too knowing, and terrifyingly sadistic. It was the smile of a child who had just been handed a magnifying glass to burn ants.

[CONNECTION TERMINATED]

Location: Celestia - The Central Control Hub

Asmoday gasped, her physical body jolting forward on the throne.

She gripped the armrests, her chest heaving as if she had just sprinted a thousand miles. The cold silence of Celestia felt suffocating compared to the digital noise of the void.

She was back. She was a God again. But as she looked down at her trembling hands, the image of that smile remained burned into her mind.

She had secured the saviors she needed. But deep down, Asmoday felt a sinking dread. She hadn't just made a deal with an external variable.

She had invited a monster to the game table.

Chapter 3: The Fall (2.1)

Location:

Whispering Woods, Mondstadt

The wind had just died down. The massive blue dragon, Dvalin, had fled into the sky, leaving Aether and Paimon crouching behind a large rock.

"Paimon thinks that dragon was really mad!" the little fairy squeaked, floating up and dusting off her cape. "And that green guy... he just vanished! Filled with dandelions!".

Aether sheathed his dull blade, looking at his hand where the Anemo energy had surged just moments ago. "Yeah. That was... strange.".

"Well, at least we didn't get eaten!" Paimon crossed her arms triumphantly. "Come on, let's head to—"

CRACK.

It wasn't thunder. It sounded like the sky itself was fracturing.

Above the clearing, the blue sky tore open. Jagged, crimson pixels bled into reality, forming a square hole in the atmosphere. There was a deafening *zip*—the sound of a corrupted file closing—and four figures were ejected from the void.

They didn't float down. They fell.

"Whoa!" Paimon shrieked, darting behind Aether.

Three of the figures plummeted straight down, vanishing with a loud *WHOOSH* into a massive, leafy thicket of bushes. The dense foliage cushioned their fall, swallowing them in an explosion of green leaves and broken twigs.

But the fourth figure—a blonde boy in a long coat—wasn't so lucky.

He drifted wide, missing the soft bushes entirely.

"Gah?! W-Wait! My landing—!"

THWACK.

Tsukasa Tenma slammed directly into the low-hanging branch of a Sunsettia tree. He spun once around the limb like a gymnast gone wrong, his coat tangling in the wood, before gravity claimed him.

SNAP.

"Ooooof!"

He hit the ground face-first, a single Sunsettia fruit dropping a second later to bounce off the back of his head.

Perspective Shift:

The Outlanders

Haruka Kiritani groaned, pushing a large fern out of her face.

The landing hadn't been graceful, but it was soft. The thick bush had absorbed the impact, leaving her more disoriented than injured. Her idol instincts kicked in—she rolled onto her knees, brushing leaves off her uniform.

She sat up, her blue eyes immediately scanning the perimeter.

'Trees. Sunlight. Dirt.'

Haruka's heart hammered against her ribs. She checked her surroundings. No stage lights. No familiar school buildings. And definitely not the high-tech streets of Shibuya.

'Minori. Airi. Shizuku.' The names flashed through her mind. She had been taken right in the middle of reviewing footage. Were they safe? Did the red light take them too?

She clenched her fist, forcing her breathing to steady. *'Panic solves nothing. I need to secure the area.'*

"Gah... my spine..."

Tsukasa Tenma scrambled to his feet near the tree; his blonde hair filled with twigs and squashed fruit pulp. He looked frantic, his eyes wide and terrified. He spun around, nearly tripping over his own long coat.

"Rui?! Emu?!" Tsukasa yelled, ignoring the bruise forming on his forehead. He looked at the empty air, grasping at nothing. "Nene?! Answer me!"

The comedy of his landing evaporated instantly. He didn't care about the pain in his legs. His mind was replaying the last image he saw—the red cube slamming into his friends.

"Did they get away?" Tsukasa grabbed his own head, hyperventilating. "If that thing hurt them... if I dragged them into this..."

Then, another thought hit him like a physical blow.

"Saki..." Tsukasa went pale. "I was supposed to be home for dinner. If I'm gone... if Saki worries... if she gets sick again..."

"Tsukasa-senpai...?"

Ichika Hoshino crawled out of the bushes a few feet away, picking leaves out of her hair. She looked completely dazed. She held her chest, looking around the forest with trembling eyes.

"Where...?" Ichika whispered. "I was just... I was just about to send the song."

She looked down at her hands. They were shaking. "Mom... she was in the next room. If she hears a noise... if she comes in and I'm gone..."

Ichika looked up at Tsukasa, her voice thick with unshed tears. "Where are Honami and the others? Are they...?"

"I don't know," Haruka stated, her voice sharp enough to cut through the rising panic.

She stood up, dusting the dirt off her uniform. She was terrified, but she stood tall. Someone had to. She gestured to the vast, wild forest around them—the towering cliffs, the strange fruit trees, the lack of any city noise.

"But look at the vegetation. The air quality," Haruka analyzed, her eyes narrowing. "This isn't a movie set. And we definitely aren't in Shibuya anymore."

"No... no, no, no..."

The faint, frantic whispering came from the darkest part of the bush.

Mafuyu Asahina was still curled up inside the foliage, her knees pulled up to her chest. She wasn't looking at the others. She was staring at her phone, frantically mashing the power button.

"It won't turn on," Mafuyu whispered, her pupils dilated. "The screen is black."

She looked up, not at Haruka, but past her—at the foreign sun in the sky. It was afternoon.

"I finished my studies," Mafuyu muttered, her voice speeding up, cracking. "I had free time. But if I'm not there when Mother checks... if I'm late..."

The "good girl" mask shattered.

"She'll be angry," Mafuyu gasped, clawing at her arms. "She'll ask where I went. I can't explain this. I can't... I need to go back. *Right now*."

She tried to stand, but her legs gave out, and she collapsed back onto the dirt, sobbing dry, terrified tears.

"Mafuyu-san!" Ichika rushed to her side, hovering her hands uncertainly, unsure how to comfort someone who looked like they were shattering.

Haruka bit her lip. This was bad. They were falling apart.

"Hey! Who are you guys?"

A high-pitched voice interrupted their spiral.

The four of them froze. Slowly, they turned toward the source of the sound.

Emerging from behind a large rock was a blonde boy with a long braid, wearing strange, exotic armor. Floating next to him was a small, white-haired creature—a child?—hovering in the air like a balloon.

"Paimon asked you a question!" the floating child said, pointing a tiny finger at Tsukasa, who was still wearing a Sunsettia pulp on his coat. "Why did you guys fall out of the sky like that?!"

Paimon looked ready to demand answers, but Aether raised a hand, stopping her mid-air.

"Paimon, wait," Aether said softly.

He didn't reach for his sword. Instead, his golden eyes widened with recognition—and sympathy. He had seen the portal that dumped them here. He had seen the jagged, crimson cubes.

'That red light...' Aether thought, a pang of grief hitting his chest. *'It's the same power that took Lumine.'*

He looked at the group before him—the blonde boy hyperventilating, the girl sobbing on the ground, and the other two looking completely lost. They weren't enemies. They were victims. Just like him.

Aether stepped forward, his posture open and non-threatening. He ignored their strange clothes and lack of Visions.

"You're safe now," Aether said, his voice gentle. He looked directly at Haruka, recognizing her as the one trying to hold it together. "That red god... did she take you from your home too?"

Chapter 4: The Wind's Blessing (2.2)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Location:
Whispering Woods

"You're safe now," Aether said, his voice gentle. He looked directly at Haruka, recognizing her as the one trying to hold it together. "That red god... did she take you from your home too?"

The question hit the group like a physical weight.

"Red... god?" Haruka repeated, testing the words. She looked at Aether, really looking at him this time. "You mean the cube?"

Aether nodded grimly. "We call her the Unknown God. We don't know why but, she took my sister... and my powers."

Flashback.

The words triggered a violent memory in all four of them.

Tsukasa saw the crimson pixels eating his hands, and the terrifying moment the cube slammed Emu and Rui backward... Ichika saw the 'Untitled' track glitching, the red light turning her safe haven into a prison... Haruka felt the cold, unyielding mass of the cube clamping around her wrist as she clawed at the table... Mafuyu felt the burning beam hitting her chest in the silence of her room.

It wasn't a glitch. It wasn't a stage effect. It was a person. A God.

"Yeah! Aether told Paimon she was super scary!" Paimon piped up, floating closer and waving her tiny hands frantically to reenact the story she had been told. "He said she blocked their path and—*whoosh*! Cubes everywhere! It sounds terrifying, like being squished into a tiny box!"

Despite the terror, Paimon's dramatic retelling snapped them out of the trance.

"So you are stranded too," Haruka concluded, letting out a breath she didn't know she was holding. She looked at the blonde traveler. His eyes held the same loss she felt gnawing at her insides. "At least we aren't the only ones."

"Hey! Less moping, more eating!" Paimon zipped over to the Sunsettia tree where Tsukasa had made his catastrophic landing. She hovered near the ground, picking up the orange fruit that had bounced off Tsukasa's head. "You guys look like you're gonna faint. And you!" She pointed a tiny finger at Tsukasa. "You knocked down the snacks, so you get first dibs!"

Paimon tossed the fruit to him. Tsukasa fumbled, barely catching it against his chest.

"Snacks?" Tsukasa stared at the fruit like it was an alien object, then looked up at Paimon with incredulity. "This is no time for a meal break! I must find a way back immediately! My burning spirit is fuel enough to—"

"Eat it, Tsukasa-senpai," Ichika said gently, placing a hand on his shoulder. "Your hands are shaking."

Tsukasa paused. He looked down. Ichika was right—his hands were trembling so violently he could barely hold the Sunsettia. The adrenaline was wearing off, leaving him hollowed out.

He swallowed his protest. He took a bite. It was sour, sweet, and incredibly juicy. The sugar hit his system instantly.

"It is... acceptable," Tsukasa declared quietly, taking a bigger bite. He grabbed another one from the grass and handed it to Mafuyu. "Here. You need energy if we are to find a way back."

Mafuyu stared at the fruit. She didn't want to eat. She wanted to go home. But the logical part of her brain—the part that aced every exam—told her that passing out from hypoglycemia would make her late. She took a small, mechanical bite.

"Okay," Aether said, seeing some color return to their faces. "We need to get you to safety. The city of Mondstadt is nearby. But first..."

He pointed back the way he came, toward the shimmering lake.

"We should go to the Statue of the Seven. It's on the way."

Location:
Starfell Lake - Statue of the Seven

The walk was short but silent. When the group emerged from the treeline, the sight of the Statue took their breath away. It stood on a small island in the middle of the lake—a towering stone figure holding an orb, glowing with a soft, turquoise light.

"That is... an Archon?" Ichika asked, awestruck.

"The Anemo Archon, Barbatos," Paimon explained proudly, puffing out her chest. "He protects this land with the wind! And he's totally famous!"

Aether looked at the group. He remembered how the statue had responded to him earlier—granting him elemental power without a Vision.

"Try touching it," Aether suggested.

"Huh?" Tsukasa blinked. "Why?"

"I don't have a Vision—a magical focus," Aether explained, pointing to his chest. "But when I touched it, the wind answered me. If you guys are 'Outlanders' targeted by the Gods too... maybe the wind will answer you."

Haruka stepped forward first. She waded through the shallow water, looking up at the stone face, then reached out her hand.

Touch.

The moment her fingertips grazed the cold stone, a gust of wind erupted from the base of the statue. It wasn't violent; it was melodic. A turquoise crest—the symbol of Anemo—flared to life above Haruka's head before dissolving into her chest.

"Whoa!" Paimon gasped, covering her mouth. "It worked! Again!"

"I can feel it," Haruka whispered, looking at her hands. A faint breeze swirled around her fingers, light and sharp. "It feels like... rhythm."

"Me next!" Tsukasa, never one to be outstaged, marched up and slapped his hand on the pedestal. "Oh, Great Stone Statue! Grant me the power to save my sister!"

WHOOSH.

A much louder, more dramatic gust of wind blasted Tsukasa's coat upward. He laughed triumphantly as the green energy surged into him. "Hahaha! See? Even the wind recognizes a Star!"

"Paimon thinks the wind is just trying to blow his hair out of his face," the fairy deadpanned to Aether.

Ichika went next, timidly touching the stone. A soft, gentle breeze wrapped around her, sounding like a hummed tune.

Finally, Mafuyu.

She didn't want power. She wanted a way home. But Aether nudged her forward gently.

"It might help," he said.

Mafuyu reached out. When she touched the statue, the reaction was different. The wind didn't swirl around her; it seemed to rush *into* her. The hollowness in her chest—the empty space she usually filled with expectations—was suddenly flooded with a cold, rushing current.

For the first time since she arrived, the suffocating anxiety in her lungs eased. She took a deep breath.

"It's... cold," Mafuyu whispered, but she didn't pull away.

"You guys really are like Aether!" Paimon cheered, doing a loop-de-loop. "Anemo powers for everyone! Now we can definitely fight off any slimes on the way to the city!"

Location:
The Gates of Mondstadt

Armed with their new (and confusing) powers, the group made good time. Aether led them out of the woods and onto the main road leading to the massive stone bridge.

When the towering walls of Mondstadt City came into view, Ichika gasped, stopping in her tracks. Windmills turned lazily in the breeze, and white stone towers reached toward the sky.

"It's..." Ichika's eyes sparkled for a brief second, overriding her fear. "It's exactly like a fantasy RPG."

Paimon tilted her head, floating closer to Ichika's face. "Ar-Pee-Gee? What's that? Is it a type of roasted fowl? Does it taste good?"

"Eh?" Ichika blinked, flustered. "N-No. It's a... game. Where you go on adventures."

"Ooh!" Paimon's eyes lit up. "Paimon likes adventures! But Paimon likes roasted fowl more."

"Stay focused," Aether warned, though he smiled slightly. "We're almost—"

SWISH.

A blur of red dropped from the sky.

A figure landed gracefully in front of them, boots clicking against the stone bridge. She stood up, brushing off her red outfit and adjusting her goggles. She held a bow, and she didn't look like she was in the mood for games.

"Halt!" the girl announced, her voice ringing with authority. "May the Anemo God protect you, strangers!"

She looked at Aether, then at the four teenagers in strange, dirty school uniforms. Her eyes narrowed.

"I am Amber, Outrider for the Knights of Favonius," she declared, keeping her hand near her quiver. "You aren't citizens of Mondstadt. Identify yourselves!"

Aether stepped forward, hands raised peaceably. "We are travelers. We just arrived in the area."

"Travelers?" Amber looked skeptical. She pulled a small notebook from her belt, flipping it open with practiced efficiency. "Article 7 of the Knight's Handbook: *'Suspicious individuals approaching the city limits must be identified and escorted.'* And you..."

She pointed at the four behind Aether. "Strange clothes. No trading goods. Visible injuries but no weapons."

Then, her gaze landed on Paimon. Her eyes narrowed further.

"And... what is *that*?" Amber pointed a gloved finger at the floating fairy. "A mascot? A toy?"

Aether looked at Paimon, then back at Amber. He kept his face perfectly straight.

"Emergency food."

"Hey!" Paimon stomped the air, her face turning red. "Paimon is NOT emergency food! That's even worse than being a mascot!"

Amber blinked, caught off guard by the banter. A small chuckle escaped her lips, breaking her stern facade. "Emergency food... I see. Well, that's one way to put it."

She sighed, lowering her bow slightly. "Okay. You guys seem harmless enough."

"We are just... lost," Haruka added, stepping forward slightly. She gave a polite, practiced bow. "We didn't mean to cause alarm."

"It's fine, it's fine," Amber waved a hand, smiling brightly. "As an Outrider, it's my job to help! I'll escort you to the City. We can get you to the Headquarters, maybe get you something to eat..."

Despite the warm smile, Haruka noticed it. Amber's hand didn't leave the vicinity of her quiver. Her stance was still braced, ready to draw her bow in a split second.

'She doesn't trust us,' Haruka analyzed, her idol instincts picking up the subtle tension. *'She's being nice, but she's watching our every move.'*

Ichika felt it too—a prickling sensation on her neck. Even Aether, for all his relaxed posture, had shifted slightly to shield the group. The welcome was warm, but the suspicion was ice cold.

"Follow me!" Amber chirped, turning around. "This way!"

They took two steps toward the gate.

Then the sky turned black.

It happened in an instant. One second, the sun was shining on the cobblestones. The next, a gale-force wind ripped through the streets, sending market stalls and crates flying.

"What is—?!" Tsukasa yelled, shielding his face as a fruit cart smashed into a wall nearby.

"Look up!" Haruka screamed.

High above the city, a massive shadow blocked out the sun. The blue dragon, Dvalin, roared —a sound that shook the very stones of the pavement. He dived, three massive tornadoes forming in his wake, tearing through the city plaza.

"The Dragon!" Paimon shrieked, grabbing onto Aether’s cape so she wouldn't blow away. "Stormterror is attacking!"

People were screaming, running for cover. The wind howled like a banshee.

"Saki..." Tsukasa’s eyes went wide. The destruction... it was real. This wasn't a stage play.

"We need to take cover!" Aether yelled over the roar of the wind, drawing his sword. "Everyone, move!"

But before they could run, the wind picked up. Mafuyu, who was the lightest of them, lost her footing.

"Ah—!"

"Mafuyu!" Ichika lunged for her, but the gale swept them both off their feet, dragging them toward the center of the plaza where the tornadoes were merging into a chaotic vortex.

Chapter End Notes

I'm on a roll making these chapters

tho i have to spew as much as possible until im busy (again)

Chapter 5: The Stormterror's Crisis (3.1)

Location: Mondstadt City Plaza

The world was a vortex of dust, shingles, and screaming wind.

"Mafuyu!" Ichika screamed, her fingers brushing the fabric of Mafuyu's sleeve for a split second before the gale ripped them apart. The wind was too strong; it wasn't natural weather. It was a cage of currents dragging them helplessly into the sky.

"Hold on!" Aether shouted, his voice barely audible over the dragon's roar. He coiled his legs, preparing to launch himself into the cyclone.

"Wait!" Amber grabbed Aether's arm, struggling to stand against the wind. She looked at Tsukasa, who was staring up at the spiraling forms of the girls with pure terror. "You can't catch them without wings!"

She reached into her pouch and threw two folded mechanical devices toward them. "Wind Gliders! Use the currents to lift off!"

Tsukasa caught the device. It looked flimsy. It looked terrifying. But then he looked up. He saw Mafuyu—limp, unresponsive, tumbling like a ragdoll toward the dragon's maw.

'She's going to die. Just like that?'

"No!" Tsukasa roared. He didn't think. He didn't hesitate. He snapped the wings onto his back with surprising speed. "I am the Star! I will not let my audience die!"

"Haruka!" Aether yelled to the blue-haired girl. "Stay with Amber! Keep the people safe!"

"Understood!" Haruka shouted back, bracing herself against a stone pillar. She turned to the panicked civilians cowering nearby. "Everyone! Move to the alcoves! Cover your heads!"

Aether and Tsukasa exchanged a single nod. Then, they jumped.

The Sky Above Mondstadt

The wind caught the gliders instantly.

Aether moved with practiced grace, riding the updraft like a hawk. He locked his eyes on Ichika, who was flailing in the mid-air current. *'Just like Lumine,'* Aether thought, gritting his teeth. *'I won't lose another one.'*

He folded his wings, diving into a steep stoop. He slammed into Ichika mid-air, wrapping one arm firmly around her waist and snapping his wings open again to brake.

"Gah—!" Ichika gasped, clutching onto his scarf. She looked up, terrifyingly high above the ground, into golden eyes that were focused and calm.

"I've got you," Aether said, his voice steady against the howling wind. "Don't let go."

Ichika's heart hammered against her ribs, but for the first time since the red cube appeared, she felt safe.

Meanwhile, Tsukasa was screaming. "WOAHHHH! TOO HIGH! TOO HIGH!"

He was tumbling through the air, flailing his limbs until the glider caught a thermal. He stabilized, his stomach lurching. He looked around wildly.

"Mafuyu!"

He spotted her. She wasn't fighting the wind. She was just falling, her eyes squeezed shut, resigned to the drop.

Tsukasa gritted his teeth. He angled his glider down, pushing the Anemo power he got from the statue to its limit. "WONDERLAND... DIVE!"

He shot forward like a missile, crashing into Mafuyu and grabbing her wrist. The momentum swung them both around violently. Tsukasa groaned as his shoulder nearly popped, but he hauled her close, gripping the back of her sweater with a death grip.

"I... caught you!" Tsukasa yelled, panting heavily, his face pale. "Open your eyes! You are safe!"

Mafuyu slowly opened her eyes. She saw Tsukasa's terrified, sweaty face, grinning maniacally to hide his fear.

"Tsukasa... senpai?" she whispered.

'He came for me?' The thought felt foreign. In her house, she was expected to be perfect on her own. No one "saved" her; they only corrected her.

"Intruders..."

The deep, rumbling voice vibrated in their skulls. Dvalin, the massive blue dragon, turned his gaze toward the four gnats buzzing in his domain. He roared, unleashing a wave of energy that shook the gliders.

"Do not fear."

A new voice entered their minds—light, playful, and masculine. It wasn't the dragon.

"I will channel the Anemo power to you. Aim for the blood clots on his neck. That is the source of his pain."

"Who is that?!" Tsukasa yelled, looking around the empty sky. "Is that the stage director?!"

"It's that green guy!" Paimon’s voice echoed (though she was hiding on the ground). "The one we saw talking to the dragon earlier!"

"Tsukasa! On the right!" Aether commanded, steering Ichika to safety on a high rooftop before turning back to the fight. "Distract him!"

"Distract him? Hah! That is my specialty!" Tsukasa deposited Mafuyu next to Ichika on the roof. "Stay here! The Star is about to perform!"

Tsukasa launched himself back into the air. He didn't have a sword. He didn't have magic missiles. But he had a loud voice and a lot of wind.

He clapped his hands together, channeling the Anemo energy. "HEY! OVER HERE! YOU OVERGROWN LIZARD!"

Tsukasa blasted a shockwave of wind—not to hurt the dragon, but to slap it right in the nose. Dvalin roared in annoyance, snapping his jaws at the annoying blonde boy.

"Now, Aether!"

Aether seized the opening. Channeling the mysterious voice's power, he fired rapid bolts of Anemo energy, piercing the purple crystals on Dvalin’s back. The dragon shrieked, writhing in pain, before finally breaking off the attack. With one last hateful glare, Stormterror turned and fled into the clouds.

The sky cleared. The wind died.

Location: Mondstadt Plaza (Ground Level)

Aether and Tsukasa glided down to the plaza, their legs shaking as they touched the pavement.

"We... we are alive," Tsukasa panted, wiping sweat from his forehead. He struck a pose, though his knees were knocking together. "A flawless performance!"

Haruka and Amber ran over from the side streets. Haruka looked exhausted; she had spent the battle pulling civilians out of the debris path.

"Are you hurt?" Haruka asked immediately, checking Tsukasa and the girls (who Amber had helped down from the roof).

"I'm fine," Ichika said, though she was still clutching Aether’s sleeve slightly. She realized it and quickly let go, blushing. "Thank you... Aether-san."

"You guys were amazing!" Amber cheered, slapping Tsukasa on the back (which nearly knocked him over). "I've never seen anyone use a glider like that on their first try!"

"Yes, well," Tsukasa laughed nervously. "I am a natural at everything I do!"

Mafuyu stood silently at the back of the group. She stared at her hand—the one Tsukasa had grabbed. It was still warm.

Clap. Clap. Clap.

The sound of slow, sarcastic applause echoed from the entrance of the Knights of Favonius Headquarters.

"You've actually got the power to go up against the dragon..."

A tall man with navy blue hair, an eyepatch, and a confident smirk strolled toward them. He looked at Aether, then at the ragtag group of students in dirty uniforms.

"Are you a new ally... or a new storm?" Kaeya Alberich asked, his single visible eye glinting with calculation.

Chapter 6: Chapter 4: The Knights of Favonius

Location:
Mondstadt City Plaza

"Are you a new ally... or a new storm?"

Kaeya's question lingered in the air, sharp and calculating. He stopped in front of the group, his single eye scanning them with a mix of amusement and suspicion. He looked at Aether, then turned his gaze to the four students who were still catching their breath.

"Strange attire," Kaeya noted, tapping his chin. "Not Fontainian. Definitely not from Liyue. And yet..."

He looked at Tsukasa. "I heard the Outrider call you 'Tenma'. And you..." He looked at Ichika. "Hoshino. Kiritani. Asahina."

Kaeya smirked, crossing his arms. "Those are Inazuman names. It is quite rare to see citizens escaping the Electro Archon's lockdown these days. Did you smuggle yourselves out on a Beidou cruise?"

"Ina-zuma?" Tsukasa blinked, confused. "I do not know this place! We are from—"

"Far away," Haruka interjected quickly, stepping in front of Tsukasa before he could mention Japan or Shibuya. She sensed that this man was sharper than Amber. "We are travelers. We... drifted here."

"Drifted. I see." Kaeya didn't look like he bought it for a second, but he let the smile remain. "Well, regardless of your origin, you defended our city. The Acting Grand Master will want to thank you personally."

He gestured toward the massive building behind him, the crest of the Knights visible above the heavy oak doors. "Shall we? It's not every day we get to host dragon-slayers."

Location: Knights of Favonius Headquarters - Grand Master's Office

The interior of the headquarters was grand, filled with polished wood, stone pillars, and the smell of old books. As the group entered the main office, they saw two women waiting for them.

One was sitting behind a large desk, looking exhausted but dignified. She had blonde hair tied back in a ponytail and wore a blue coat—**Jean**, the Acting Grand Master.

The other was leaning against a bookshelf, wearing a purple witch's hat and holding a book. She looked up with lazy, cat-like interest—**Lisa**, the Librarian.

"Acting Grand Master!" Amber saluted sharply. "I have brought the travelers who assisted during the attack."

Jean stood up, her expression softening as she looked at the ragtag group.

"Welcome to Mondstadt," Jean said, her voice commanding yet warm. "I am Jean, Acting Grand Master of the Knights of Favonius. I saw the battle from the balcony."

She walked around the desk, stopping in front of Aether.

"Traveler," she nodded to him. "Your combat skills turned the tide. Mondstadt is in your debt."

Then, she turned to the four students. Her gaze lingered on their injuries and dirt-stained clothes.

"And you four," Jean continued. "You are clearly not soldiers. You have no Visions. And yet, you acted."

She looked at Tsukasa. "You drew the dragon’s fire. That was reckless, but it bought us crucial time."

"It was a calculated risk!" Tsukasa declared, puffing out his chest (though he winced when he inhaled too deeply). "A Star must always seize the spotlight, even if the co-star is a dragon!"

Jean cracked a small, weary smile. Then she looked at Haruka.

"And you," Jean said softly. "While the battle raged, you remained on the ground with Outrider Amber. My guards told me you organized the evacuation of the lower plaza. You saved many lives today."

Haruka bowed politely. "I just... guided them to safety. It’s what anyone would do."

"Humility is a virtue," Lisa purred from the corner, closing her book. She walked over, her green eyes scanning the boys up and down. "Oh my. Such cute little cuties we have today. And from Inazuma, by the sound of it?"

"We are—" Ichika started, but stopped when she saw Mafuyu.

Mafuyu was standing by the door, trying to make herself as small as possible. She wasn't listening to the praise. She was trembling. The sight of Jean—an authority figure, radiating expectations and rules—was making her stomach turn. It felt too much like home. It felt like being called into a teacher's office, or worse, her mother's study.

Jean noticed the tension. She cleared her throat, shifting back to business.

"Regardless of where you come from, we have a crisis," Jean said, her face turning serious. "Stormterror... Dvalin... has been attacking the city. His power is surging because of the three elemental temples surrounding Mondstadt. We need to clear them to cut off his power source."

She looked at the map on her desk, then glanced briefly at the closed door of her office, as if checking for eavesdroppers.

"Our forces are currently... stretched thin," Jean admitted, her voice lowering slightly. "And while there are other foreign delegates in the city offering 'aid', accepting their help would come with political consequences Mondstadt cannot afford right now."

She looked back at the group with a desperate, calculating hope.

"But you... you are unaffiliated," Jean noted. "You have no political ties. If you have the power of Anemo, we could use your help without compromising our position."

"We'll help!" Paimon volunteered immediately. "If we help, do we get paid? Maybe in food?"

"Paimon..." Aether sighed.

"We will assist," Haruka said firmly. She looked at her friends. They were stranded. They needed allies. Helping the government was the best way to secure shelter and information. "We need to find a way home. Perhaps if we help you, you can help us find answers."

"It is a deal," Jean agreed. "However, since you are new to combat, we should split up to cover the temples efficiently."

Jean looked at the map on her desk, then at her officers.

"**Lisa**," Jean commanded. "You take the Traveler and the loud one... Mr. Tenma. His 'distraction' tactics might pair well with your magic."

Lisa winked at Tsukasa. "Oh, lovely. I do enjoy a spirited assistant. Don't worry, little one, big sister will keep you safe."

Tsukasa froze, his face going pale. "B-Big sister?"

"**Kaeya**," Jean continued. "You take Ms. Hoshino and Ms. Kiritani. They seem disciplined. I trust you can guide them."

Kaeya’s eye glinted. He wanted to interrogate them further, and the quiet, smart ones were usually the keys to the truth. "It would be my pleasure. I promise to be a gentleman."

"**Amber**," Jean finished. "Take Ms. Asahina. She looks... shaken. Keep her safe. Do not push her into the frontline."

Amber nodded vigorously. "Understood, Master Jean! I'll protect her!"

Jean looked at the group, her hand resting on her sword hilt.

"The Stormterror threat ends today. Knights, Outlanders... move out."

Chapter 7: The Witch and The Star (Chapter 5)

Location: Temple of the Lion

The entrance to the temple was ancient, damp, and smelled of ozone. It stood nestled in the cliffs of the Windrise area, a gaping stone maw leading into the dark.

"My, my," Lisa hummed, adjusting her hat as she looked at the heavy stone doors. "It’s been a while since I stretched my legs. I hope you boys are ready to keep up."

She turned her green eyes toward Tsukasa, who was standing stiffly next to Aether. The blonde boy was vibrating—either from adrenaline or pure terror.

"You're trembling, little star," Lisa purred, leaning closer. "Are you cold? Or perhaps... excited to go on a date with a librarian?"

"I-I am not trembling!" Tsukasa shouted, his voice cracking an octave higher than usual. He struck a pose, pointing dramatically at the door. "I am merely... vibrating with the intensity of a thousand suns! A World Future Star does not fear a dark cave!"

"He's totally scared," Paimon whispered to Aether.

Aether nodded silently, checking his sword. "Let's just get this over with."

Inside the Temple

The air inside was stale. Hilichurl camps were set up further in, blocking the path to the Wind Dragon’s power source.

"Alright," Lisa said, her tone shifting from playful to instructional. "Traveler, you know the basics. But you..." She pointed a gloved finger at Tsukasa. "Mr. Tenma. Jean said your Anemo power is raw. Show me what you can do."

"With pleasure!" Tsukasa declared.

He marched forward. A group of three Hilichurls noticed him and shrieked, charging with wooden clubs.

"Witness the power of the Phoenix Wonderland!" Tsukasa yelled. He clapped his hands together, channeling the wind. **"RISING STAR STRIKE!"**

He threw his hands out. A blast of wind erupted—but it wasn't a focused blade like Aether’s. It was a chaotic, expanding shockwave. It knocked the Hilichurls backward, sending them tumbling like bowling pins, but it also blew Paimon backward into a wall.

"Hey!" Paimon yelped. "Watch where you aim that!"

"Anemo..." Lisa observed, her eyes narrowing with intellectual curiosity. "It spreads. It’s not precise, but it covers a wide area. Useful."

She stepped forward, electricity dancing around her fingertips.

"Let big sister show you how to mix things up," she smiled.

Lisa flicked her wrist. A violet lantern of Electro energy manifested, shooting bolts of lightning that arched between the wet Hilichurls.

"Now, Little Star!" Lisa commanded. "Hit them with your wind! Spread the spark!"

Tsukasa didn't need to be told twice. "Understood! **GALE FORCE ENCORE!**"

He unleashed another blast of wind. When the Anemo hit the Electro-charged enemies, the reaction was instantaneous. *Swirl.* The purple lightning didn't just stay on one target; it exploded outward, chaining to every enemy in the room.

The Hilichurls shrieked as they were overloaded with elemental energy, vanishing into ash moments later.

"Ooh!" Paimon’s eyes sparkled. "It went *zap* and then *whoosh*!"

"Electro charged with Anemo," Lisa explained, blowing a wisp of smoke from her finger. "A classic combination. You make a surprisingly good conductor, Mr. Tenma."

"Hahaha!" Tsukasa laughed, placing his hands on his hips. "Of course! A Star shines brightest when paired with... uh..."

He looked at Lisa, who was smiling at him with that terrifyingly knowing look.

"...with a capable director!" he finished weakly.

The Inner Sanctum

They moved deeper. Between fights, the atmosphere grew quieter.

"So," Lisa broke the silence, her voice echoing in the hallway. "Inazuma, was it? Or 'far away' as your friend put it?"

Tsukasa stiffened. "I... I really do not know what this Inazuma is."

"You don't have to lie to me, cutie," Lisa teased, though her eyes were sharp. "But I am curious. You fight with such... desperation. Most people without Visions run from dragons. You jumped straight at one."

Tsukasa stopped walking. He looked down at his gloves.

"My sister," Tsukasa said quietly. The volume dropped from his voice, leaving only the raw honesty underneath. "Saki. She... she has a weak constitution. She spent most of her life in a hospital bed."

Aether looked up, surprised. This was the first time Tsukasa had spoken normally.

"I became a Star to make her smile," Tsukasa continued, clenching his fist. "To show her the wonders of the world. If I ran away... if I let fear stop me... how could I ever face her again?"

He looked up at Lisa, his eyes burning with determination.

"I don't care about dragons or gods. I just need to get back to her. So if fighting clears the path, I will fight."

Silence stretched in the hallway.

Lisa’s playful smirk faded. For a brief moment, the Librarian looked genuinely softened. She saw the resemblance now—the reckless bravery, the loyalty. It reminded her of Jean.

"My, my," Lisa sighed softly, shaking her head. "A good big brother. I have a soft spot for those."

She walked past him, patting him on the head—not teasingly, but affectionately.

"Come along then, Little Star. Let's clear this path for you."

The Wind Node

They reached the final chamber. A massive, corrupted Wind Node pulsed in the center, guarded by a Hydro Abyss Mage.

"Invaders!" the Mage squeaked, summoning a bubbling water shield. It danced around, firing bubbles that trapped Aether.

"Traveler!" Tsukasa yelled.

"Mr. Tenma!" Lisa shouted, her voice snapping like a whip. "Distraction! Now!"

"Leave it to me!"

Tsukasa didn't attack. He ran *toward* the Mage, waving his arms frantically.

"HEY! YOU FLOATING BUBBLE-BATH!" Tsukasa screamed at the top of his lungs, leaping onto a stone pillar and striking a ridiculous pose. "LOOK AT ME! I AM THE FUTURE STAR! YOUR PERFORMANCE IS LACKING!"

The Abyss Mage stopped attacking Aether, turning its mask toward the shouting idiot on the pillar. "Gah?! What is this—"

That split second of confusion was all Lisa needed.

"Blitz."

The sky turned purple. Lisa raised her hand, and a massive lightning bolt crashed through the temple ceiling (metaphorically), slamming directly into the wet Abyss Mage.

Electro-Charged.

The shield popped instantly. The Mage shrieked as it was stunned by the electricity.

"Traveler! Finish it!" Lisa commanded.

Aether broke free from the bubbles, dashed forward, and delivered a swirling Anemo slash that sent the Mage flying into the abyss below.

The Wind Node shattered. The storm outside the temple ceased immediately.

Temple Exit

They emerged back into the sunlight of Windrise. Tsukasa collapsed onto the grass, panting heavily.

"We... we did it," Tsukasa wheezed. "Another... flawless... show."

"You did well," Aether admitted, sitting down next to him. "Your voice... really carries."

"Is that a compliment?" Tsukasa asked, squinting.

"Let's say yes," Paimon giggled.

Lisa walked out last, dusting off her gloves. She looked at the exhausted boy on the grass and smiled.

"You passed, Mr. Tenma," Lisa said. "You're noisy, reckless, and entirely untrained. But..."

She leaned down, whispering into his ear so only he could hear.

"You have the heart of a Lion. Jean was right to trust you."

Tsukasa went beet red. "I—Uh—Thank you!"

"Now," Lisa straightened up, stretching her arms. "Let's head back. I'm dying for a tea break. And I'm sure Kaeya is having *much* more fun with your quiet friends."

Chapter 8: Chapter 6: The Wolf and the Idols

Location: Temple of the Wolf

The path to the temple was quiet. Too quiet.

Kaeya Alberich walked a few paces ahead, his boots crunching softly on the gravel. He didn't look back, yet Ichika felt like his single visible eye was watching their every breath.

"You two are quiet," Kaeya remarked, his voice smooth as silk. "Unlike your blonde friend. Is silence a custom where you come from?"

"We prefer to observe," Haruka replied evenly, matching his pace. She didn't flinch. "In a new environment, listening is safer than speaking."

"A wise philosophy," Kaeya chuckled. He stopped at the entrance of the Temple of the Wolf—ancient stone ruins overgrown with moss. "Most travelers are eager to share their stories. Or ask for Mora. But you... you haven't asked for anything. Not food, not shelter."

He turned, leaning against the stone archway.

"It makes one wonder," Kaeya smiled, but the air temperature seemed to drop. "Are you selfless? Or are you simply afraid of slipping up?"

Ichika gripped her skirt. *'He knows. He knows we're hiding something.'*

"We are focused on the task, Sir Kaeya," Haruka said, her blue eyes meeting his cold stare without hesitation. "Grand Master Jean asked us to clear the temple. Shall we discuss our backstory later?"

Kaeya held her gaze for a long second. Then, he laughed—a genuine, amused sound.

"Straight to business. I like that." He pushed off the wall, summoning a jagged sword made of Cryo energy in his hand. "After you, ladies."

Inside the Temple

The interior was flooded with water. Stone platforms floated on the surface, connected by narrow bridges.

"Wet environments," Kaeya noted, flicking his wrist. "Terrible for dry socks, but excellent for Cryo."

A group of Hydro Slimes bounced on the platform ahead.

"Watch closely."

Kaeya dashed forward. He didn't scream attacks like Tsukasa. He moved like a dancer—precise, lethal. He slashed through a slime, muttering a single word: **"Freeze."**

CRACK.

The slime turned into a solid block of ice instantly.

"Now," Kaeya looked back at them. "Shatter it. Show me your wind."

Haruka stepped up. She took a deep breath. She didn't have combat training, but she had spent thousands of hours perfecting choreography. She understood flow. She understood momentum.

She didn't run. She glided.

Haruka leapt over a puddle, landing lightly on the balls of her feet. She reached out, feeling that "rhythm" she sensed at the statue.

'One, two, three. Turn.'

She spun, sweeping her arm out. A blade of Anemo energy sliced through the air, perfectly timed. It hit the frozen slime.

Swirl.

The wind picked up the Cryo element, expanding the freezing mist outward. The ice didn't just break; the cold spread, freezing the water around the platform and trapping two other slimes in place.

"Impressive form," Kaeya clapped slowly. "You move like a duelist. Who taught you? The Shogun's guard?"

"My dance instructor," Haruka replied truthfully, landing back in a neutral stance.

"A dancer?" Kaeya raised an eyebrow. "Deadly grace. I suppose that makes sense."

Suddenly, a hidden Hilichurl Archer on a high ledge fired a crossbow bolt. It was aimed directly at Haruka's back.

"Haruka-chan!" Ichika screamed.

Ichika didn't think. She threw her hand forward. She didn't try to attack. She tried to *protect*.

The wind answered her desire. It didn't slash; it swirled into a tight, protective barrier around Haruka. The arrow hit the wind current and was deflected harmlessly into the water.

"Oh?" Kaeya's eye widened slightly. "A barrier variant? Rare."

Ichika panted, her hand shaking. "I... I won't let you get hurt, Haruka."

Haruka looked at Ichika, softening her guarded expression. "Thank you, Ichika."

The Interrogation

They moved deeper into the ruins. The challenges were simple, but the conversation was the real battlefield.

"You know," Kaeya said casually as they waited for a stone gate to open. "Inazuma is a locked nation. The Raiden Shogun has seized all Visions. It must have been terrifying to live there."

He watched their faces closely. He was setting a trap. If they were truly from Inazuma, they would have strong opinions on the Vision Hunt Decree.

"I... I don't know who that is," Ichika admitted, her voice small.

Kaeya paused. "You don't know the Raiden Shogun? The God of your own land?"

"We told you," Haruka interjected, stepping between Kaeya and Ichika. "We drifted here. We are not from Inazuma. We don't know your Gods."

"Not from Inazuma... and yet you bear its names," Kaeya murmured, pacing around them. "And you have no respect for the Archons. You walk into a temple and wield elements without prayer."

He stopped, his voice dropping to a whisper.

"Are you from the Abyss?"

The temperature in the room plummeted. Ice crystals formed on the walls. Kaeya’s hand hovered near his sword. It wasn't a joke anymore. To a Knight of Favonius, specifically one with Kaeya's heritage, unknown agents using magic without Visions were dangerous.

Haruka felt the threat. She realized that one wrong word would turn this "cooperation" into an execution.

"We are not from the Abyss," Haruka stated, her voice iron-hard. "We are lost. We were taken from our homes by a red cube. We just want to go back."

She looked Kaeya dead in the eye.

"You look at us with suspicion. That is your job. But look at Ichika. Look at how she shakes. Does she look like an assassin to you? Or does she look like a scared child who just wants to see her mother?"

Kaeya stared at Haruka. He looked at Ichika, who was indeed trembling, clutching her uniform sleeve.

He saw the fear. It was raw. It was genuine. It reminded him of a rainy night, years ago, when he and Diluc were just boys.

The ice on the walls melted.

Kaeya sighed, the tension draining from his shoulders. He flashed his charming smile again, though it felt a little more real this time.

"You have a sharp tongue, Miss Kiritani," Kaeya chuckled. "Very well. I believe you. For now."

The Final Trial

The final chamber housed a massive Hydro Abyss Mage and a retinue of Hilichurls.

"Alright," Kaeya drew his sword. "Let's finish this. I'll freeze the big one. You two... make a mess."

Kaeya dashed in. **"Cool it!"**

He unleashed a wave of frost, freezing the Abyss Mage solid before it could teleport.

"Now!"

"Ichika!" Haruka signaled.

"Yes!"

Ichika hummed a high note—a vocalization that resonated with the Anemo power. A wind current surged, lifting the smaller Hilichurls into the air.

Haruka used the opening. She sprinted forward, using Ichika’s windstream to boost her jump. She soared over the frozen Mage.

"Cycle... Break!"

She swung her hand down. The Anemo blast slammed into the frozen Mage from above. The reaction—*Shatter* mixed with *Swirl*—cracked the Mage’s shield instantly. The monster shrieked as it dissolved into hydro particles.

The wind node shattered. The temple fell silent.

Outside the Temple

They walked back into the sunlight of Windrise.

"Not bad," Kaeya admitted, spinning a coin in his fingers. "You have terrible form, no tactical experience, and you hesitate too much."

Ichika looked down, discouraged.

"But," Kaeya continued, looking at Haruka. "You have excellent instincts. And you..." He looked at Ichika. "You have a strong desire to protect. That counts for something."

He turned to walk away, waving his hand over his shoulder.

"I'll report your success to Jean. Try not to get into trouble before we get back to the city."

As he walked away, Kaeya’s smile faded. He murmured to himself.

"Red cubes... Unknown God... and 'Drifters' who don't know the Archons."

He narrowed his eye.

"Interesting. It seems the Traveler isn't the only variable on the board."

Chapter 9: Chapter 7: The Falcon and the Puppet

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Location: Temple of the Falcon

The walk to the final temple was suffocating, mostly because Amber wouldn't stop talking.

"And that over there is Whispering Woods! Oh, wait, you guys fell there, so you already know that," Amber laughed, walking backward to face Mafuyu. "And if you look past that ridge, that's Windrise! The Great Tree is super pretty this time of day."

Mafuyu Asahina walked with her hands clasped in front of her, her posture perfect, her expression polite but hollow.

"It is very beautiful," Mafuyu responded, her voice flat. "The topography of this region is quite distinct."

Amber paused. She had met a lot of travelers, but talking to Mafuyu felt like talking to a receptionist at the Adventurers' Guild—polite, efficient, and completely walled off.

"You know," Amber said, tilting her head. "You don't have to be so... stiff. We're just clearing a temple, not taking a knight's exam."

"I am merely ensuring I do not cause trouble," Mafuyu replied automatically. "If I perform well, will Master Jean expedite our request to go home?"

Amber frowned slightly. *'Perform well? Request?'* It sounded so transactional.

"Well, yeah, Jean keeps her promises," Amber said softly. "But you look like you're marching to your doom. We're a team, remember? I've got your back!"

She patted the bow on her hip.

"I'm the Outrider Champion of Mondstadt! I won't let a single slime touch you. So... relax a little?"

Mafuyu looked at Amber's bright, earnest smile. *Relax.* That was a command she didn't know how to follow. Relaxing meant slipping up. Slipping up meant disappointment.

"I will do my best," Mafuyu said.

Amber sighed, turning back around. "Okay. Let's just... get this over with."

Inside the Temple

The Temple of the Falcon was high up, built into a cliffside. The wind here was stronger, howling through the open arches.

"Alright!" Amber drew her bow, her demeanor shifting instantly to combat readiness. "Pyro Slimes ahead. They explode if you get too close. I'll shoot them to vent their heat. You..."

She looked at Mafuyu, who was standing perfectly still, waiting.

"You have Anemo power, right? Can you push them back if they get too close?"

"Yes," Mafuyu nodded. "I will push them back. Is there a specific distance you require?"

"Uh... just far enough so they don't burn us?" Amber scratched her cheek. "Just... go with the flow!"

Amber drew back her string. The arrowhead ignited with flames. *Twang.*

The arrow hit the lead slime, causing it to darken and steam. "Now, Mafuyu!"

Mafuyu raised her hand. She didn't have a weapon. She didn't have Tsukasa's flair or Haruka's rhythm. She just felt the cold emptiness in her chest—the wind she absorbed at the statue.

‘Push them away. That is the order.’

She released the breath.

"Disappear."

A gust of wind surged forward. It wasn't violent or chaotic. It was a freezing, silent vacuum. It stripped the oxygen from the air around the slimes, snuffing out Amber’s fire instantly but also launching the slimes violently into the far wall.

SPLAT.

The slimes didn't just bounce; they were flattened by the sheer pressure of the wind.

Amber lowered her bow, blinking. "Whoa. That was... intense. Effective! But intense."

Mafuyu lowered her hand, her face impassive. "Did I make a mistake? You said to push them."

"No! No mistake!" Amber waved her hands frantically. "You did great! It's just... your wind feels kinda... lonely?"

"Lonely?" Mafuyu blinked. The concept didn't compute. Wind was just moving air.

The Crisis

They reached the central chamber. A large Mitachurl with a wooden shield roared, blocking the mechanism to the Wind Node.

"Big guy!" Amber yelled. "I'll distract him with Baron Bunny! You flank him and hit him with wind!"

Amber tossed her explosive puppet. "Go go, Baron Bunny!"

The puppet danced, drawing the Mitachurl's attention. The monster roared and smashed its shield down, crushing the toy. *BOOM.* The explosion staggered the monster, setting its wooden shield on fire.

"Now, Mafuyu! While the shield is burning! Spread the fire!"

Mafuyu stepped out from behind the pillar. She raised her hand to cast Anemo.

But the Mitachurl recovered faster than expected. It ignored the fire on its shield and charged —not at Amber, but at the movement. At Mafuyu.

Mafuyu froze.

A massive, burning wall of wood was rushing toward her.

'Move,' her brain screamed. *'Wait for instructions,'* her habit whispered.

She didn't run. She stood there, watching the death approach, paralyzed by the fear of making the *wrong* move. If she ran and ruined Amber's shot, it would be her fault. If she attacked and failed, it would be her fault.

So she did nothing.

"MAFUYU! DODGE!"

A blur of red slammed into her. Amber tackled Mafuyu to the ground just as the shield swung over their heads, the heat singing their hair.

They rolled across the stone floor. Amber sprang up instantly, firing three arrows in rapid succession into the Mitachurl's exposed face. The monster roared in pain and collapsed, dissolving into ash.

Silence fell over the chamber.

Mafuyu lay on the floor, staring up at the stone ceiling. She was alive.

"Are you crazy?!"

Mafuyu flinched. She sat up slowly. Amber was standing over her, breathing hard, her goggles askew.

"Why didn't you move?!" Amber yelled, her voice shaking. "He was going to crush you!"

Mafuyu looked down at her hands. "I... I didn't have instructions. I didn't know the correct path. If I moved, I might have interfered with your—"

"Instructions?!" Amber looked incredulous. She dropped to her knees, grabbing Mafuyu by the shoulders.

"Mafuyu, listen to me. There are no instructions for *living*! If a monster charges you, you run! If you want to fight, you fight! You don't wait for permission to survive!"

Mafuyu stared at Amber. The words bounced around her skull. *Don't wait for permission.*

"But..." Mafuyu's voice trembled. "If I do it wrong..."

"There is no 'wrong' way to save your own life!" Amber said fiercely. She pointed to the open ceiling of the temple, where the sky was visible.

"Look at that sky. Mondstadt is the City of Wind and Freedom. Here, the wind goes wherever it wants. It doesn't ask the trees for permission to blow. It doesn't ask the birds if it can lift them."

Amber squeezed Mafuyu's shoulders.

"You have that wind inside you now. So stop waiting for orders. What do *you* want to do?"

Mafuyu looked at the sky. It was blue. Limitless. Terrifyingly open. What did she want?

"I..." Mafuyu whispered. "I want... to stand up."

Amber smiled. It was the brightest thing in the temple. She let go, offering a hand.

"Then stand up."

Mafuyu took the hand. She pulled herself up. Her legs were shaking, but she was standing.

She looked at the wind swirling in her palm. It was cold. It was empty. But for the first time, it felt... hers.

Exit

They emerged from the temple. The final Wind Node was destroyed. The storm over Mondstadt had fully dissipated.

"We did it!" Amber cheered, stretching her arms. "Team Outrider is unstoppable!"

She looked at Mafuyu. "You okay?"

Mafuyu adjusted her sweater. She felt exhausted, but the suffocating pressure in her chest—the feeling of her mother's eyes on her back—had lessened by a fraction.

"I am... functional," Mafuyu said. Then, she paused. She tried to mimic what she thought a normal person would say. "Thank you. For the... save."

Amber grinned, slapping Mafuyu on the back. "Anytime! Now, let's get back to the city. I promised to treat you to a Sticky Honey Roast, and I never break a promise!"

As they walked back toward the city, Mafuyu didn't walk perfectly in step behind Amber. She walked slightly to the side, watching the grass move in the wind.

'It doesn't ask for permission,' Mafuyu thought.

She reached out her hand, letting the breeze slip through her fingers.

'I wonder what that feels like.'

Chapter End Notes

Let me know on your opinions of the story!

Chapter 10: Chapter 8: The Diplomat and the Reunion

Location: Knights of Favonius Headquarters - Hallway

The walk back from the Temple of the Lion had been surprisingly pleasant, mostly because Lisa kept complimenting Tsukasa, which fed his ego enough to ignore his aching legs.

"And that final blast," Lisa chuckled, the heels of her boots clicking on the headquarters' floor tiles. "Rough around the edges, but very spirited. You'd make a fine mage with a few decades of training."

"Decades?!" Tsukasa balked. "I am a quick learner! I shall master this 'Anemo' in a week!"

"Shh," Aether hissed, stopping abruptly in the hallway. He held out an arm to stop Tsukasa and Paimon.

They were just outside the Grand Master’s office. The door was slightly ajar, and raised voices leaked into the corridor.

"Acting Grand Master, you cannot be serious," a cold, imperious female voice sneered. "That beast is terrorizing your city. It has destroyed property, trade routes, and now threatens the safety of your citizens."

"Stormterror is one of the Four Winds of Mondstadt," Jean’s voice replied, sounding tired but firm. "We do not kill our protectors based on a temper tantrum. We will handle this internally."

"Internally?" The stranger scoffed. "Your 'internal' methods are failing. The Fatui are prepared to lend you our strength. We can crush the beast and restore order. All we ask is that you step aside."

Tsukasa frowned, whispering to Lisa. "Who is that? She sounds like the villain from *The Earl's Gray Demise*."

"The Fatui," Lisa’s smile vanished, replaced by a look of genuine distaste. "Diplomats from Snezhnaya. Wolves in sheep's clothing."

Inside the office, the argument reached its peak.

"This is not a negotiation," Jean stated, her tone leaving no room for argument. "Mondstadt is the City of Freedom. We do not trade our sovereignty for Snezhnayan protection. If you touch Dvalin, you answer to me."

There was a tense silence. Then, footsteps approached the door.

"Very well," the cold voice hissed. "But when your city falls to ruin, do not come begging to the Tsaritsa."

The door swung open. A tall woman wearing a mask over her eyes and a heavy coat strode out. She stopped when she saw the group in the hallway—Aether, Paimon, Lisa, and Tsukasa.

She sneered at them, brushing past Tsukasa with enough force to knock him off balance.

"Rude!" Paimon yelled at her retreating back.

"Hmph," the Diplomat didn't look back as she descended the stairs.

Inside the Office

Lisa pushed the door open fully. "My, my. The air in here is positively stifling."

Jean was standing by the window, rubbing her temples. She turned when she heard Lisa, her shoulders slumping slightly in relief.

"Lisa. Traveler," Jean sighed. "And Mr. Tenma. I assume the Temple of the Lion is cleared?"

"Cleared and dusted," Lisa confirmed, walking over to pour Jean a cup of water from a pitcher. "Our little star here was quite the distraction. And the storm outside has lifted."

"Excellent," Jean managed a small smile. "That buys us time. But as you heard... the pressure is mounting."

"That woman was incredibly impolite!" Tsukasa announced, crossing his arms. "If she is a diplomat, she needs acting lessons. Her villainy was too obvious!"

Jean chuckled softly, taking the cup from Lisa. "I wish it were just an act. The Fatui are... persistent."

Just then, the door opened again.

Team Kaeya entered. Kaeya looked relaxed, twirling a coin, while Haruka and Ichika looked physically drained but unharmed.

"Temple of the Wolf secured," Kaeya reported with a lazy salute. "And I'm happy to report that our guests are quite capable. Miss Kiritani has a sharp mind for tactics."

Haruka bowed slightly to Jean. "We managed to destroy the source of the wind. The area should be safe."

Ichika immediately scanned the room. "Tsukasa-senpai! You're safe."

"Of course!" Tsukasa grinned. "Wait, where are—"

"Making way! Coming through!"

Team Amber burst through the door. Amber was practically skipping, while Mafuyu walked silently behind her, clutching her sweater sleeves.

"Temple of the Falcon is clear!" Amber announced, giving a thumbs up. "We totally smashed those slimes! Mafuyu was great!"

Mafuyu flinched slightly at the name but didn't retreat into the corner this time. She stood next to Amber, looking at the floor, but she was standing.

"We are... finished," Mafuyu said quietly.

The De-Briefing

"Thank you, everyone," Jean said, looking at the assembled group. For the first time all day, she looked hopeful. "With the three temples cleared, Dvalin's power flow has been disrupted. The storm barriers around his lair should be weakening."

She turned to Aether. "Traveler, your help was invaluable."

Then, she looked at the four students. They were dirty, bruised, and clearly not from this world. They were civilians who had stepped up when her own knights were stretched thin.

"And to you four," Jean said formally, placing a hand over her heart. "On behalf of the Knights of Favonius, I thank you. You defended a city that is not your own. You have proven your honor."

"We just wanted to survive," Haruka said honestly. "But... we are glad we could help."

"Now," Jean exhaled, sitting down on the edge of her desk. "We have the Dragon crisis to solve, but first... you look exhausted."

"We are!" Paimon floated onto the desk. "Paimon is starving! And they," she pointed at the Sekai group, "look like they're gonna pass out!"

Amber stepped forward, putting an arm around Mafuyu's shoulder (who stiffened, but didn't pull away).

"Master Jean, they need to wind down," Amber insisted. "They've been through a lot today. Falling from the sky, fighting dragons, clearing temples... that's too much for one day! I promised to take them for Sticky Honey Roast!"

"Amber is right," Kaeya added smoothly. "We can discuss the Fatui and the Dragon tomorrow. Tonight, our guests need rest."

Jean nodded. "Agreed. I will arrange quarters for you at the Goth Grand Hotel—provided the Fatui haven't booked the entire establishment yet. If not, the barracks are available."

"Hotel sounds better," Tsukasa muttered.

"We will figure out a way to get you home," Jean promised, looking directly at Mafuyu and Ichika. "But for tonight... please, rest. You are safe here."

Ichika looked at her friends. Tsukasa was trying to look energetic but his legs were shaking. Haruka was leaning against the wall for support. Mafuyu looked hollow, but she was listening.

"Thank you, Grand Master," Ichika said.

"Alright!" Amber clapped her hands. "To the Good Hunter! Food is on me!"

As the group filed out of the office, eager for food and sleep, Aether lingered for a second, looking at Jean.

'The Fatui... and the Abyss,' Aether thought. *'This world is just as messy as the last one.'*

He turned and followed the strange, uniform-wearing teenagers out the door. They were variables in this loop, just like him. And he had a feeling they were going to need each other.

Chapter 11: Chapter 9: Under the Foreign Moon

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Location: The Good Hunter, Mondstadt City

The smell of roasting meat and caramelized sugar wafted through the evening air of Mondstadt. For four teenagers who had spent the last few hours fighting dragons and exploring ancient ruins, it was the best smell in the world.

"Order up!" Sara, the waitress, placed a massive platter on the outdoor table. "Five servings of Sticky Honey Roast, plus Fisherman’s Toast and Mushroom Skewers!"

"Food!" Paimon cheered, vibrating in the air. "Paimon thought she was gonna waste away!"

"It looks... incredibly caloric," Haruka noted, eyeing the glistening glaze on the steak. But her stomach let out a traitorous growl. She sighed, picking up a fork. "But I suppose we burned enough energy to justify it."

Amber grinned, raising a glass of apple cider. "Dig in, guys! You earned it!"

Tsukasa didn't need telling twice. He sliced a piece of the roast and took a bite. His eyes widened.

"Delicious!" Tsukasa announced, standing up (and startling a passing cat). "This flavor... it is robust! Sweet yet savory! It rivals the catering at the Phoenix Wonderland!"

"Sit down, Senpai," Ichika pulled him back down by his coat, her face flushed with embarrassment. "People are staring."

"Let them stare!" Tsukasa declared, though he sat back down. "A Star must appreciate the local cuisine with gusto!"

As they ate, the adrenaline of the battle began to fade, replaced by the heavy reality of their situation.

"So," Aether said, wiping his mouth with a napkin. He looked at the group. "Kaeya mentioned you guys drift? From a place called 'Inazuma'?"

"No," Haruka shook her head, placing her fork down. "We aren't from Inazuma. We're from Japan. A city called Tokyo."

Amber and Paimon exchanged confused looks.

"Japan?" Amber tilted her head. "Is that near Fontaine? Or maybe across the Mare Jivari?"

"I don't think it's in this world at all," Aether said quietly.

The table went silent.

Ichika gripped her glass. "What do you mean?"

"I'm a traveler from another world," Aether admitted, pointing to the sky. "I travel between stars. Teyvat... this world... it's just one of many."

He gestured to the city around them—the windmills, the lack of electricity, the knights in armor.

"If you've never heard of the Seven Archons, or Visions, or the Fatui... then you're probably like me. You're Outlanders."

Mafuyu stopped eating. She looked at the sky. It was dark now, and the stars were out. But the constellations were wrong.

"So..." Mafuyu's voice was barely a whisper. "We really are... gone."

"We can't go home?" Ichika asked, her voice trembling. "But... my band. We have practice tomorrow."

"My show," Tsukasa muttered, the light fading from his eyes. "Saki... she'll be waiting."

The mood plummeted. The realization that this wasn't just a "weird dream" but a displacement across realities hit them harder than the dragon did.

Amber bit her lip. She hated seeing people look so hopeless.

"Hey!" Amber slammed her hand on the table, making the silverware jump. "Don't give up yet! Mondstadt is the City of Freedom, right? And Aether is looking for his sister, too! If anyone can find a way to cross worlds, it's the Knights... or maybe the Alchemists! Albedo is super smart!"

She paused, tapping her chin, trying to scrape up more hope.

"Or... maybe even Lord Barbatos himself! He is the God of Freedom, after all! He'd surely help outlaws like you!"

She faltered slightly, scratching the back of her head with a nervous laugh.

"Though... well, he hasn't actually been seen in a few centuries. He kinda just... disappeared like the wind after the war. Classic Barbatos, right? Haha..."

Tsukasa looked at Amber's burning determination (and her awkward attempt to cover for her missing God). He looked at Aether, who gave him a solid, understanding nod.

Tsukasa slapped his cheeks with both hands. *Smack.*

"She is right!" Tsukasa shouted (a little too loud). "We are the Tsukasa Tenma Heavy Industry... no, we are the Teyvat Expedition Team! We shall not be defeated by a mere

dimensional displacement!"

He grabbed a mushroom skewer and pointed it at the sky.

"Just you wait, Saki! Your big brother will return with stories of dragons and knights!"

Ichika smiled weakly. "Tsukasa-senpai really never changes."

"It's reassuring, in a way," Haruka admitted, taking a sip of her cider.

Location: Goth Grand Hotel

After dinner, Jean made good on her promise. The Goth Grand Hotel was lavish, though currently occupied mostly by Fatui diplomats who glared at them in the lobby.

They were given two rooms on the top floor.

Room 1: The Girls (Ichika, Haruka, Mafuyu, Paimon)

The room was warm, lit by candles and a fireplace. Paimon had immediately claimed the softest pillow on the rug and fallen asleep, snoring softly.

Haruka sat on the edge of the bed, unlacing her boots. She looked over at Mafuyu, who was standing by the window, staring out at the darkened city.

"Mafuyu-san," Haruka said gently. "You should sleep. We don't know what tomorrow holds."

Mafuyu didn't turn around. She was holding her phone. It was a cold, black brick in her hands.

"It's quiet," Mafuyu whispered.

"Yes," Ichika said, organizing her pillows. "No cars. No trains."

"No notifications," Mafuyu added.

She ran her thumb over the screen. Usually, by this time, she would have received three texts from her mother asking about her prep school results. Or a reminder to sleep early for tomorrow's lessons.

There was nothing.

"She can't see me," Mafuyu murmured.

"What was that?" Haruka asked.

"Nothing," Mafuyu turned around. Her face was still pale, but there was a strange flicker in her dull eyes—was it fear? Or relief? "I... I will try to sleep."

She climbed into the bed, pulling the thick duvet over her head. For the first time in years, she was sleeping in a room where her door didn't have a lock, yet she felt strangely... hidden.

Room 2: The Boys (Aether, Tsukasa)

The boys' room was simpler. Aether sat on his bed, polishing his dull blade with a cloth. Tsukasa stood on the balcony, leaning against the railing, looking at the massive statue of Barbatos in the distance.

Aether put the sword down and walked out to the balcony.

"You put on a good show at dinner," Aether said, leaning on the rail next to him.

Tsukasa sighed—a long, deflating sound that seemed to let all the "Star" energy out of his body. He slumped over the railing.

"It is exhausting," Tsukasa admitted, his voice dropping to a normal, teenage register. "Acting like everything is fine."

"You're doing it for them," Aether noted. "For Ichika and the others. To keep morale up."

"They are scared," Tsukasa said, looking at his hands. "Hoshino is trembling. Asahina looks like she is about to shatter. If I panic... they will break."

He gripped the railing.

"I have a little sister," Tsukasa said suddenly. "Saki. She... she relies on me. I promised I would always be there to make her laugh. To wipe her tears."

He looked at Aether, his eyes wet.

"If I'm here... who is making her smile? Who is protecting her?"

Aether felt a pang in his chest. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, dried flower—an Inteyvat.

"I know the feeling," Aether said softly. "My sister, Lumine... we were separated by that God. I've been looking for her for months."

Tsukasa looked at Aether. He saw the weariness in the traveler's eyes, but also the steel.

"You never gave up?" Tsukasa asked.

"Never," Aether vowed. "I will tear down the sky if I have to. I will find her."

Tsukasa stared at him. Then, he stood up straight. He adjusted his coat, the "Star" returning to his eyes, but this time, it wasn't an act. It was resolve.

"Then I shall do the same!" Tsukasa declared. "We are big brothers! We cannot let the universe defeat us!"

He held out a hand.

"Traveler... Aether. Let us form a pact. I will help you find your sister."

Aether smiled, gripping Tsukasa’s hand firmly.

"And I'll help you get home to yours."

The pact was sealed under the moonlight of Teyvat. Two brothers, worlds apart, united by the same goal.

"Now!" Tsukasa yawned loudly. "I must sleep! A Star requires at least eight hours of beauty rest to shine!"

"Right," Aether chuckled, following him inside. "Goodnight, Tsukasa."

Chapter End Notes

If you are wondering why Haruka revealed the real place where they came from, i decided at this point, i think Haruka would trust the Favonius at this part, especially Amber, and no i am not shipping them, i have no plans to pair haruka yet

Current ship:

- Aether / Ichika
- Tsukasa / Mafuyu

Chapter 12: Chapter 10.1: The Librarian’s Wrath

Location: Knights of Favonius Library

The morning sun filtered through the grand windows of the library, illuminating the dust motes dancing in the air. It was a peaceful, scholarly atmosphere.

"AND SO! THE STAR DECLARES—!"

"Shh."

The sound wasn't loud, but it carried the weight of a thunderclap. Tsukasa Tenma froze mid-pose, his arm still extended toward a bookshelf. He slowly turned his head.

Lisa Minci was sitting at her desk, sipping tea. She didn't look up from her ledger. Sparks of purple electricity danced dangerously around her quill pen.

"Mr. Tenma," Lisa purred, her voice dripping with dangerous sweetness. "This is a place of quiet contemplation. If you wish to project your voice, might I suggest the training grounds? Or perhaps... the solitary confinement cells?"

"I-I apologize!" Tsukasa whispered violently, pulling his arm back. "I was simply... practicing my monologue for when we return home!"

Aether, who was browsing the 'Teyvat Travel Guide' nearby, sighed. "Tsukasa, maybe sit down before she actually zaps you."

"A wise suggestion," Lisa closed the ledger with a heavy *thud*. She stood up, stretching her arms. "Although, since you two occupy so much space, perhaps you can make yourselves useful. I have a... situation."

"A situation?" Paimon floated over. "Is it another dragon?"

"Worse," Lisa’s eyes narrowed. "An overdue book."

Tsukasa blinked. "A book? Is that all?"

The temperature in the library dropped ten degrees. The sky outside seemed to darken momentarily.

"It is *The Boar Princess*, Volume 7," Lisa recited, electricity crackling visibly in her hair. "It was due three days ago. The borrower, an adventurer named Dongdong, claims he lost it near the Whispering Woods. He said a 'fuzzy thief' took it."

She turned her gaze to the boys.

"I am going to retrieve it. You are coming with me. We wouldn't want the thief to get... lonely, would we?"

Tsukasa gulped. "Y-Yes, Ma'am! Big Sister! Miss Lisa!"

Location: Whispering Woods

The trio (plus Paimon) trekked into the woods. Lisa moved with leisurely grace, while Tsukasa marched stiffly, trying to act like a bodyguard to avoid being electrocuted.

"So," Lisa asked, glancing at Aether. "Have our guests settled in? I heard the Grand Master arranged rooms at the Goth."

"Yeah," Aether nodded, using his Elemental Sight to scan for tracks. "They're still shaken up. But they're tough."

"Especially the little star here," Lisa teased, poking Tsukasa's cheek. "Loud, but resilient. I like that."

"I am a detective!" Tsukasa declared suddenly, crouching down to inspect a broken twig. "Look here! Footprints! Small... chaotic... definitely the work of a villain!"

"Those are squirrel tracks, Tsukasa," Aether deadpanned.

"A villainous squirrel!" Tsukasa corrected without missing a beat.

"Over here, cuties," Lisa called out from a clearing ahead. She was pointing her catalyst at a purple elemental trail. "Elemental traces. It seems our thief isn't a squirrel. It's an Abyss Mage."

The Confrontation

They tracked the trail to a small cave near the edge of Starfell Lake. Inside, a Hydro Abyss Mage was floating over a campfire, cackling as he held a book.

"Yes! With the ancient knowledge in this tome... the Abyss Order shall—wait, why is it just pictures of boars?" the Mage muttered, flipping the pages confusedly.

"Ahem."

The Mage froze. He floated around slowly.

Standing at the cave entrance was Lisa. She wasn't smiling. Violet lightning arched from her shoulders, illuminating the dark cave with a terrifying stroboscopic effect.

"That book," Lisa said, her voice dropping to a whisper that echoed louder than a scream. "Does not belong to you."

The Abyss Mage shrieked. "The Witch of the Purple Rose! Attack!"

He summoned a hydro shield and waved his staff. Three Hilichurls charged from the shadows.

"Tsukasa! Aether! You handle the riff-raff," Lisa commanded, stepping forward. "The Mage is *mine*."

"Understood!" Tsukasa yelled, happy to be anywhere that wasn't near Lisa right now.

He charged the Hilichurls. "STARLIGHT KICK!" (It was a regular kick, but with wind).

He knocked a Hilichurl shield aside, allowing Aether to sweep in with a sword combo. They worked well together—Tsukasa using wide Anemo blasts to control the crowd, while Aether delivered precision strikes.

Behind them, the cave filled with the sound of pure destruction.

ZAP. CRACK. BOOM.

"GAAAAHHH!" The Abyss Mage screamed as his shield evaporated instantly under a bombardment of lightning.

"You stole... a library book..." Lisa chanted, each word punctuated by a lightning bolt. "And you... dog-eared... the pages!"

KA-BOOM.

When Tsukasa and Aether finished with the Hilichurls, they turned around. The Abyss Mage was a pile of ash. The book, miraculously unharmed, was floating in a sphere of electricity back to Lisa’s hand.

"There," Lisa sighed happily, dusting off her dress. "All retrieved. Good work, boys."

Tsukasa was hugging Paimon in terror. "Remind me never to return a book late."

"Paimon thinks returning it on time isn't enough," Paimon whispered back. "We should wrap it in gift wrap just to be safe."

The Aftermath

They walked out of the cave, back into the sunlight of Starfell Lake. It was a beautiful afternoon. The water shimmered, and the statue of the Seven glowed in the distance.

"Well, that was a productive outing," Lisa hummed, holding the book close. "Maybe I'll treat you boys to tea back at the headquarters."

"That sounds delightful!" Tsukasa said, his energy returning now that the combat was over. "I—"

BOOOOOOOOOM.

The ground shook.

A massive plume of water erupted from the *other* side of Starfell Lake, towering higher than the trees. It was followed by a shockwave of heat and smoke that ruffled their clothes even from this distance. Birds scattered from the trees in a panic.

"WHOA!" Paimon grabbed Aether's hair. "What was that?! Did a volcano go off?!"

Tsukasa struck a defensive pose. "An explosion? Is it the Dragon again?! Or the Fatui?!"

Aether drew his sword, scanning the horizon. "That came from the supply route area. We should check it out!"

They looked at Lisa, expecting the Grand Mage to be springing into action.

Instead, Lisa glanced at the mushroom cloud, sighed, and shook her head.

"Oh dear," she said, sounding remarkably unbothered. "It seems a certain spark knight is having a playdate."

"Playdate?!" Tsukasa yelled, pointing at the smoke column. "That looks like a war zone!"

"Don't worry," Lisa waved a hand dismissively, turning back toward the city. "Amber is over there with your friend Mafuyu. I'm sure she has it handled. Besides..."

She yawned, covering her mouth delicately.

"It's tea time. And I strictly do not work during tea time. Are you coming?"

Aether and Tsukasa exchanged a look. The explosion was massive. But if Lisa said it was fine...

"I... suppose we follow the scary lady," Tsukasa whispered.

"Agreed," Aether whispered back.

As they followed Lisa back to Mondstadt, Aether glanced back one last time at the smoke rising over the lake.

'Amber and Mafuyu are over there,' Aether thought. *'I hope they survived whatever that was.'*

Chapter 13: Chapter 10.2: The Spark and the Silence

Location: Goth Grand Hotel - Hallway

The morning sun hadn't quite breached the heavy curtains of the hotel room, but Mafuyu Asahina was already dressed. She sat on the edge of her bed, smoothing out the wrinkles in her skirt for the tenth time.

Haruka and Ichika were still asleep. Paimon was snoring loudly in the corner.

Mafuyu stared at the door. Waiting. In her house, the morning routine was strict. If she wasn't ready by 6:00 AM, she was late. Here, there was no schedule, which paradoxically made her more anxious. *What am I supposed to do?*

Knock. Knock. Knock.

The sound was sharp and rhythmic. Mafuyu stood up instantly, opening the door before the knocker could finish.

Standing in the hallway was Amber, looking bright-eyed and energetic despite the early hour.

"Oh! Good morning, Mafuyu!" Amber blinked, surprised to see her up so early. "Wow, you're an early bird, huh? I was worried I'd wake everyone up."

"I have been awake," Mafuyu replied quietly, stepping into the hall and closing the door softly behind her so as not to disturb the others. "Do you require something?"

"Actually, yes!" Amber adjusted her gloves. "Master Jean has a special request. Most of the Knights are busy cleaning up the debris from yesterday's storm, but we have a... small situation near Starfell Lake."

Amber scratched her cheek nervously.

"Jean specifically asked if you could tag along. She thinks your... uh... *calm demeanor* might be helpful for this specific mission."

"A mission," Mafuyu repeated. Her posture straightened. This was familiar territory. An order. A task to prove her worth. "I understand. I am ready to depart immediately."

Amber laughed, waving her hands. "It's not a combat raid! It's more of a... retrieval mission. Come on, I'll explain on the way!"

Location: En Route to Starfell Lake

"So," Amber said, adjusting her goggles as they trekked through the Whispering Woods. "Just a heads up. The Knight we're going to retrieve is... special."

Mafuyu walked beside her, hands clasped. "Special? Is he a high-ranking officer?"

"She," Amber corrected with a nervous laugh. "And technically, yes. She’s the Spark Knight. But... well, she’s a child. And she likes explosions. A lot."

Mafuyu stopped walking. She blinked.

"A child?" Mafuyu repeated. "The Knights of Favonius employ child soldiers?"

"No! No, not like that!" Amber waved her hands frantically. "She’s just... really strong. And if we don't watch her, she accidentally terraforms the landscape. Master Jean usually keeps her grounded, but she snuck out this morning to 'go fishing'."

Mafuyu processed this. A child who "terraforms landscapes" and sneaks out. In Mafuyu’s world, a child sneaking out would result in a lecture about responsibility and future prospects. Here, it resulted in an official Knight escort.

"I see," Mafuyu said, though she didn't.

Location: Starfell Lake (The Other Side)

They found her quickly. It wasn't hard. They just followed the sound of *kaboom*.

Standing at the edge of the lake was a small girl in red, wearing a massive backpack and a clover-marked hat. She was humming a cheerful tune while tossing small, round objects into the water.

Splash. BOOM.

Dead fish floated to the surface.

"Klee!" Amber shouted, running forward.

The girl turned around, her face lighting up. "Big Sister Amber!"

Klee ran over, tackling Amber into a hug. Then, she peered around Amber’s legs to look at Mafuyu. Her big red eyes widened with curiosity.

"Ooh! Who is this? She looks... purple!" Klee pointed at Mafuyu. "Is she a new Knight? Why is her face so sad? Did she lose her Dodoco?"

Mafuyu stiffened. "I... do not have a Dodoco."

"This is Mafuyu," Amber introduced, resting a hand on Klee’s hat. "She's a guest from far away. We're here to bring you back, Klee. Master Jean is looking for you."

"Aww," Klee kicked the dirt. "But Klee isn't done! Klee saw some weird fluffy monsters hiding boxes in the cave over there! I wanted to see if they had fish inside!"

Amber froze. "Weird fluffy monsters? Hiding boxes?"

Amber looked at where Klee was pointing—a secluded inlet masked by heavy brush.

"Mafuyu, stay close to Klee," Amber ordered, her voice shifting to professional mode. "I'm going to check it out."

The Discovery

They approached the inlet carefully. Hidden behind the rocks was a makeshift camp. It wasn't just a campfire; it was a stockpile. Stacks of crates marked with the Hydro element symbol, alongside massive, unstable-looking barrels filled with elemental slime condensate and Pyro powder.

Amber’s face went pale.

"Abyss Order," Amber hissed, ducking behind a rock. She scanned the labels on the crates. "Look at that stockpile... highly volatile elemental amber, concentrated slime condensate... They aren't just looking for loot."

She looked toward the distant spires of Mondstadt.

"They're planning a major attack on the city. If this much explosive power went off inside the walls... the casualty count would be catastrophic."

"Explosives?" Klee whispered, her eyes sparkling. "Like bombs?"

"Bad bombs, Klee," Amber warned grimly. "We need to report this to—"

"Look!" Klee pointed. "A Fuzzy Ball!"

A Cryo Abyss Mage floated out of the cave, inspecting the crates. "Yes... with these slime bombs, we shall blow the Knights to smithereens! Hahaha!"

Mafuyu watched the creature. It was grotesque, but Klee didn't look scared. She looked... excited.

"He's a bad guy, right?" Klee asked, reaching into her backpack.

"Yes, but we need to wait for backup," Amber whispered. "Those barrels are unstable. If we start a fight here, the chain reaction could—"

"Don't worry, Amber!" Klee grinned, pulling out a round, fluffy bomb with rabbit ears. "Klee will help! Jumpy Dumpty, go!"

Amber’s eyes went wide. "Klee, NO!"

It happened in slow motion. Mafuyu watched as the small red bomb arced through the air. It bounced once—*boing*—on the ground.

Boing.

It landed directly on top of the stack of unstable Abyss barrels.

The Abyss Mage stared at the bomb. "Eh?"

Klee covered her ears. "Da-da-da!"

Amber didn't think. She didn't calculate. She moved.

"GET DOWN!"

Amber grabbed Mafuyu by the collar of her sweater with one hand and snatched Klee by the backpack with the other. She threw herself backward, diving behind a massive slab of rock just as the world turned white.

The Explosion

KABOOOOOOOOOOOOM.

It wasn't just a blast; it was an erasure.

The mix of Klee’s pyro and the concentrated elemental slime created an Overload reaction of catastrophic proportions. The supply cache didn't just explode; it vaporized. The shockwave shattered the trees nearby and sent a mushroom cloud rising high into the sky (visible all the way from the Library where Lisa was sipping tea).

Debris rained down like hail. The ground shook violently enough to knock fish out of the lake.

Behind the rock, Amber was huddled over the two girls, shielding them with her own body and her Baron Bunny shield. She was coughing, her red outfit covered in dust.

When the raining rocks finally stopped, silence returned to the lake.

Amber slowly lifted her head. "Is... is everyone alive?"

Klee popped up, her face covered in soot, looking incredibly pleased with herself. "Wow! That was a really big one! Did you see the fish go fly?"

Mafuyu sat up. She brushed the dirt off her skirt. Her ears were ringing. She looked at the crater where the Abyss camp used to be. There was nothing left but a smoking hole.

She looked at Klee, who was laughing. Then she looked at Amber, who looked ready to have a heart attack.

"You..." Mafuyu stared at the child. "You destroyed the target efficiently."

"I know!" Klee beamed.

"KLEE!" Amber yelled, grabbing the child’s cheeks. "You can't just throw bombs at strange barrels! We could have been blown up!"

"But... but..." Klee’s lip wobbled. "The bad guy was there... and Klee wanted to help..."

Amber sighed, the anger draining out of her instantly. She hugged the soot-stained child. "I know. I know. You saved us. But please... warn me next time?"

She looked at Mafuyu. "Are you hurt? I'm so sorry! I didn't mean for your first outing to be a demolition mission!"

Mafuyu looked at Amber. She saw the genuine concern. She saw the lack of anger toward the child who made a mistake.

In Mafuyu's house, a mistake of this magnitude would have meant silence. Cold, disappointed silence.

But here, amidst the smoke and ruin, Amber was hugging the mistake.

Mafuyu felt something twitch in the corner of her mouth. A muscle memory she hadn't used in a long time.

"I am uninjured," Mafuyu said. She looked at the smoking crater. "And... it was quite loud."

"Loud is good!" Klee cheered. "Big Sister Purple gets it!"

Amber groaned, standing up and dusting herself off. "Okay. Let's get back before Master Jean sees the smoke. Maybe if we run, we can blame it on... I don't know, a meteorite?"

"Or a dragon?" Mafuyu suggested deadpan.

Amber stared at her. Then, she burst out laughing.

"Yes! A dragon! You're catching on, Mafuyu!"

Chapter 14: Chapter 10.3: The Maid and the Weight of Stone

Location: Goth Grand Hotel

The sun was already high in the sky, streaming aggressively through the curtains, when Haruka finally opened her eyes.

She blinked at the ceiling, disoriented. Her internal clock usually woke her up at 5:30 AM sharp for vocal warm-ups. She checked the clock on the mantle.

9:15 AM.

"Nine?!" Haruka sat up, throwing the covers off. "We slept in!"

"Mn... five more minutes..." Ichika groaned from the other bed, burying her face in the pillow.

"Ichika-chan, wake up," Haruka said, though she felt the heaviness in her own limbs. The adrenaline from fighting Stormterror, clearing the Temple of the Wolf, and the sheer mental exhaustion of dimension-hopping had finally caught up to them. Their bodies had simply shut down to recover.

Haruka looked around the room. The third bed was empty. The sheets were neatly made, military style.

"Mafuyu-san is gone," Haruka noted, fully awake now. She checked the corner where Paimon had slept. Empty.

Ichika sat up, rubbing her eyes and yawning. "The boys... maybe they're awake?"

They quickly dressed in their uniforms—which Noelle had kindly washed and pressed overnight—and hurried downstairs to the lobby.

The hotel owner, Mr. Goth, was behind the counter. He looked up and smiled. "Ah, the young ladies are awake. Did you sleep well? You looked like you had fought a war when you arrived last night."

"We did, actually," Haruka muttered. "Excuse me, sir. Have you seen our companions?"

"Oh, yes," Mr. Goth nodded. "The young man with the blonde hair—Mr. Tenma—and the Traveler left about an hour ago. The Librarian, Miss Lisa, came to collect them."

He leaned in, lowering his voice conspiratorially. "She had a rather... *mischievous* smirk on her face. Said something about 'overdue books' and 'manual labor'. I almost felt sorry for the boys."

Ichika paled. "That sounds... ominous."

"And the other young lady?" Haruka asked. "The one with purple hair?"

"Miss Asahina left even earlier," Goth replied. "Outrider Amber came to fetch her. Said it was a direct order from the Acting Grand Master for a special assignment."

"So we're the only ones left behind," Ichika sighed.

"It makes sense," Haruka reasoned, leading Ichika toward the door. "We slept in because we were exhausted. They probably didn't want to wake us. Let's head to the Headquarters. If anyone knows where they are, it's Master Jean."

Location: Knights of Favonius Headquarters - Exterior

The walk to the headquarters was peaceful. The city was bustling, merchants repairing the stalls damaged by yesterday's storm.

They reached the massive stone steps of the Headquarters. The guards nodded to them respectfully, but before they could enter the main doors, a sound echoed from the area behind the building.

CRACK.

It sounded like a tree snapping in half.

THUD.

Then, the sound of heavy stone hitting dirt.

"What was that?" Ichika flinched, instinctively grabbing Haruka’s sleeve. "Another attack?"

"It came from behind," Haruka said, her eyes narrowing as she looked toward the side of the massive stone building. "Let's check before we go in."

They circled the building to the stone courtyard used for training. They expected to see a squad of knights sparring, or perhaps Kaeya running drills.

Instead, they saw a single girl.

She looked about their age, wearing a maid’s outfit plated with silver armor. She had short, silver hair and a gentle expression. She was holding a massive claymore—a sword that looked heavy enough to crush a carriage—with one hand.

In front of her was a row of heavy wooden training dummies reinforced with stone plating.

"Hah!" The maid swung the blade.

CRUNCH.

The wooden dummy didn't just break; it exploded. Splinters and stone fragments flew through the air like shrapnel.

"Oh dear," the maid sighed, lowering the massive sword as if it weighed nothing. She pulled a broom out of nowhere. "I put too much force into it again. I need to clean this up before Master Jean sees..."

"Um..." Ichika stepped forward, stepping on a twig.

The maid spun around, clutching the broom to her chest. "Oh! G-Greetings!"

She bowed deeply, flustered. "I apologize! The training area is a bit messy right now. Please, allow me a moment to tidy up!"

"It's fine," Haruka raised a hand. She looked at the destroyed dummy, then at the girl’s slender arms. "That was... incredible strength. Are you a Knight?"

"Me? Oh, no, no," the girl shook her head vigorously. "I am Noelle. A maid of the Knights of Favonius. I am simply... training. Hoping to pass the selection exam someday."

She looked at the debris, then at the sun. "Oh no, look at the time! I need to dispose of this, then finish the laundry for the barracks, then help Marjorie locate a missing shipment, and then prepare afternoon tea for Lisa..."

"That sounds like... a lot," Ichika noted, feeling a strange kinship. It reminded her of trying to balance songwriting, practice, school, and keeping her friend group together.

"It is my duty!" Noelle beamed, picking up a heavy crate of rocks.

Ichika looked at Haruka. Haruka nodded. They had nothing else to do, and they owed the Knights for the hospitality.

"Let us help you," Ichika offered, rolling up her sleeves.

"Oh! No, I couldn't possibly impose!" Noelle protested. "You are guests!"

"We're guests who slept in until nine," Haruka said with a small smile, grabbing the other side of the crate. "Consider it a workout. We need to stay in shape too."

The Montage: Several Hours Later

It started with moving rocks. Then it became hanging sheets in the courtyard. Then it became carrying crates of supplies from the lower city all the way up the stairs.

By the time the afternoon sun hit its peak, Haruka and Ichika were wiped out.

Ichika was leaning against a wall, panting. Her arms felt like jelly. Haruka was wiping sweat from her forehead, her perfect idol posture slipping just a fraction.

"Okay..." Haruka breathed out. "That's... the last shipment."

Noelle, however, looked as fresh as a rose. She wasn't sweating. She wasn't panting. She clapped her hands together brightly.

"Excellent work! Thank you so much!" Noelle chirped. "Now, I just need to scrub the library floors, polish the chandeliers, and then I can start prepping dinner for the squad!"

She picked up a bucket and mop, ready to sprint back inside.

"Wait."

Haruka reached out, grabbing Noelle's shoulder. "Noelle-san. Stop."

Noelle blinked, confused. "Is something wrong? Do you need water?"

"We need a break," Haruka said, gesturing to Ichika, who was sliding down the wall. "And *you* need a break."

"Me? I'm fine!" Noelle smiled. "I'm used to this! If I don't do it, who will? Everyone is so busy with Stormterror. I want to lighten the burden."

Haruka looked at her. She saw the delusion. It was the same delusion Haruka had lived with for years—the idea that if you just work harder, harder, harder, you can fix everything.

"You're taking on too much," Haruka said bluntly.

Noelle blinked. "Pardon?"

"Laundry. Cleaning. Training. Logistics," Haruka listed them off, her voice firm. "We helped you for four hours, and I'm exhausted. But you're planning to do *another* four hours?"

"You're trying to carry the whole organization on your back," Ichika added softly, standing up. "I know that feeling. Thinking that if you stop for one second, everything falls apart."

"But... it is my duty," Noelle said, her voice wavering slightly. "I want to be useful to Master Jean."

"But you can't save everyone if you break yourself, Noelle-san," Haruka said gently.

Noelle stared at them. It was rare for anyone to scold her for working *too* hard. Usually, people just thanked her and gave her more work. She gripped the handle of her mop.

"I..." Noelle hesitated. "I never thought of it that way. I just..."

"Oh! The Heroes from yesterday!" Noelle suddenly realized who she was talking to, her eyes lighting up to deflect the heavy topic. "I heard about you! You helped Amber and Kaeya!"

BOOOOOOOOOM.

The conversation was cut short.

The ground beneath their feet jumped. A massive roar echoed from the direction of Starfell Lake, followed by a rising mushroom cloud that towered over the city walls.

"What was that?!" Ichika gasped, grabbing Haruka. "An explosion? Is it the Abyss?"

"That came from the lake," Haruka said, her face pale. "The hotel manager said Amber took Mafuyu that way. If they were caught in that..."

They looked ready to sprint toward the gates.

"Please, do not panic!"

Noelle's voice was surprisingly calm. She placed the mop down gently. She looked at the mushroom cloud, shielding her eyes to squint at the shape of it.

"That explosion pattern..." Noelle mused. "High Pyro concentration. Overload reaction. Followed by the scattering of local wildlife."

She turned to Haruka and Ichika with a reassuring smile.

"That is almost certainly the Spark Knight, Klee."

"Klee?" Ichika blinked.

"Yes. She is... enthusiastic," Noelle explained politely. "I saw the deployment roster this morning while I was dusting Master Jean's office. Amber was assigned to retrieve Klee from Starfell Lake. And your friend, Miss Asahina, was listed as accompanying them."

"Wait," Haruka processed this. "So that explosion... wasn't an attack on them? It was *them*?"

"Most likely," Noelle nodded. "If Klee is involved, explosions are... a standard form of greeting. I am sure Outrider Amber has the situation under control. Or... mostly under control."

Noelle picked up her broom again.

"If anything, I should probably prepare a bath and fresh clothes. Klee usually returns covered in soot. And perhaps some tea for your friend. She might be in shock."

Haruka and Ichika looked at the mushroom cloud, then at the calm maid.

"This world," Ichika sighed, slumping her shoulders. "Is terrifying."

"But," Haruka smiled slightly, looking at Noelle. "It seems to have good people."

Chapter 15: Chapter 10.4: The Feast of Survivors

Location: The Good Hunter

The sun had set over Mondstadt, painting the sky in deep purples and oranges. The lanterns of the Good Hunter restaurant flickered warmly, welcoming the weary.

Haruka, Ichika, and Noelle were the first to arrive. Or rather, Haruka and Ichika dragged Noelle to a table.

"Please, really, I should be serving you!" Noelle protested, holding a tray she had instinctively grabbed from the counter. "Guests should not be hosting the host!"

"Sit," Haruka said gently but firmly, pushing Noelle onto a bench. "We spent six hours moving rocks. You are forbidden from lifting anything heavier than a spoon for the rest of the night."

"But—"

"It’s an idol’s order," Ichika added with a tired smile, winking at Haruka.

Noelle froze halfway to the bench. Her eyes went wide.

"Idol?" Noelle repeated the word as if it were sacred. She looked at Haruka, then at Ichika. "You mean... like Miss Barbara?"

Haruka blinked, surprised. "You have idols here in Mondstadt?"

"Oh, yes!" Noelle clasped her hands together, her face lighting up with genuine admiration. "Deaconess Barbara! She is the shining light of the Church of Favonius. She sings to heal people’s hearts and bodies. She calls herself an 'idol'!"

"A healing idol..." Haruka mused, a small, professional smile touching her lips. "That sounds wonderful. I suppose the desire to make people smile through song is universal."

"Wait," Amber interjected, sliding into the seat opposite them. "Does that mean you guys are famous back home? I mean, Barbara has fan clubs and everything. Do you have a fan club, Haruka?"

Haruka looked away, taking a sudden interest in the tablecloth. "Ah... well. I used to perform. It was... a different life."

"She was amazing," Ichika blurted out, coming to her friend's defense. "She filled stadiums!"

"Stadiums?!" Amber and Noelle gasped in unison.

"Hmph!"

A loud scoff interrupted the moment. Tsukasa marched up to the table, looking disheveled but proud, with Aether and Paimon trailing behind him.

"Stadiums are impressive, yes," Tsukasa declared, striking a pose (and wincing as his back cracked). "But a true Star shines regardless of the venue! Whether it is a stadium or a... very scary library... the impact is what matters!"

"He's just jealous because Lisa liked the quiet ones better," Aether whispered to Noelle as he sat down.

"I heard that!" Tsukasa yelled.

Team Lisa joined the table. Amber and Mafuyu arrived moments later—Amber looking exhausted and soot-stained, Mafuyu looking eerily calm.

"We're here," Amber sighed, collapsing onto the bench. "I dropped Klee off. She's... safe."

"Mafuyu-san?" Haruka looked at her friend concernedly. "Are you hurt?"

"I watched a child vaporize a lake," Mafuyu said flatly.

The table went silent. Then, unexpectedly, Tsukasa burst out laughing.

"Aha! So this world is filled with eccentrics! Healing Idols, Explosive Children, and Librarians who wield lightning like a conductor's baton!"

Tsukasa grabbed a fork and pointed it at the sky.

"It seems we shall fit right in!"

"Speak for yourself," Paimon grumbled. "Paimon just wants to fit food in her mouth."

"Order up!" Sara arrived with the massive platter. "Sticky Honey Roast for the heroes!"

As they ate, the conversation drifted back to music. Noelle shyly asked Haruka about "idol training," while Tsukasa demanded to know if this "Barbara" was a worthy rival for a World Future Star. Even Mafuyu listened, her eyes lingering on the lute playing softly in the background.

For a moment, the barrier between worlds felt thin. Music, after all, was a language they all spoke.

"So," Haruka said later, wiping her mouth as the plates were cleared. "The temples are clear. The immediate threat is gone. What happens next?"

Aether’s expression turned serious. He leaned forward.

"The storm is gone, but Dvalin is still suffering. We need to find a way to cut off the corruption completely."

"Lisa mentioned something," Aether continued. "About the dragon's connection to Barbatos. If we want to save him, we need to understand the history."

"And where do we find that?" Tsukasa asked.

Aether pointed toward the upper city, where a large statue stood in the plaza.

"There's a bard," Aether said. "A guy in green. We saw him in the woods talking to the dragon. If anyone knows what's going on... it's him."

"The green guy?" Paimon tilted her head. "The Tone-Deaf Bard?"

"Exactly," Aether nodded. "We need to find him."

"Then it is decided!" Tsukasa slammed his hand on the table. "Tomorrow, the Teyvat Expedition Team hunts for this bard! We shall extract the truth with..."

He paused.

"With polite questioning!" Ichika finished for him.

"Yes! Polite questioning!" Tsukasa agreed.

"And maybe," Haruka added softly, looking at Noelle. "We can meet this Barbara, too. I think... I'd like to hear her sing."

Noelle beamed. "I will introduce you! She would love to meet fellow idols!"

Mafuyu looked up at the moon hanging over Mondstadt.

‘A child who destroys. A maid who carries the world. An idol who heals.’

She looked at her friends, laughing around the table.

‘And us. Still here.’

"Tomorrow," Mafuyu whispered to herself.

Chapter 16: Chapter 11: The Bard of Wind and Song

Location: Mondstadt Streets (Night)

The feast at the Good Hunter finally wound down. Noelle insisted on clearing the table (despite Haruka's protests), and Amber had to drag herself home to rest for her morning patrol.

"Get some sleep, guys!" Amber waved, walking down the street with Noelle. "We'll check in on you tomorrow!"

"Goodnight!" Ichika waved back, watching them disappear around the corner.

The remaining group—Aether, Paimon, and the four students—began the walk back toward the Goth Grand Hotel. The city was quiet now, the stone streets illuminated by the soft glow of streetlamps and the massive moon overhead.

"So," Tsukasa said, patting his full stomach. "The plan remains! Tomorrow at dawn, the Teyvat Expedition Team begins the Great Bard Hunt! We shall scour every tavern and street corner until we find this 'green guy'!"

"We should probably start at the plaza," Haruka suggested logically. "Street performers usually favor high-traffic areas."

"Agreed!" Tsukasa nodded. "We shall extract the truth with—"

"Wait."

Mafuyu stopped abruptly. She wasn't looking at the hotel. She was looking up a side staircase that led toward the Cathedral.

"What is it, Asahina?" Tsukasa asked, stopping mid-stride.

Mafuyu pointed a finger toward a figure slipping quietly through the shadows of the upper walkway. A boy in green, with a cape that fluttered like leaves in the wind, holding a wooden lyre.

"That hat," Mafuyu whispered. "And the braid. Isn't that him?"

Aether squinted. "It is! That's the guy from the woods!"

"He's getting away!" Paimon gasped. "Quick! Before he disappears again!"

"The hunt begins early!" Tsukasa declared, spinning on his heel. "After him!"

Location: Anemo Archon Plaza

They followed the bard up the winding stone steps to the massive plaza beneath the towering statue of Barbatos. But they didn't have to chase him down.

He wasn't running. He was performing.

A small crowd had already gathered by the time they arrived. Venti stood at the base of the statue, his lyre in hand. He plucked the strings, and the sound was crisp and clear, carrying effortlessly over the night wind.

" *'The dragon who defended Mondstadt in the ancient past...'* " Venti sang, his voice weaving a story of old struggles and forgotten friendships.

The PJSK group slowed down, standing at the back of the crowd so as not to interrupt.

Ichika stopped breathing for a second. As a musician, she recognized it immediately. The technique. The projection. The raw emotion.

'He's good,' Ichika thought, entranced. *'He's not just playing notes. He's telling a story with the pitch.'*

Haruka crossed her arms, analyzing him with a professional eye. *'He commands the crowd's attention effortlessly. No stage lights, no backup dancers. Just charisma.'*

Tsukasa, however, narrowed his eyes critically.

"His projection is excellent," Tsukasa whispered loudly to Aether. "But his staging is lacking! Where are the pyrotechnics? Where is the dramatic lighting? A Star would never perform in such dim conditions!"

"Shh!" Paimon slapped Tsukasa's arm. "Listen!"

Venti continued the song, telling the tragedy of Dvalin—how the dragon swallowed the corrupted blood to save the city, only to be forgotten and descend into madness.

As the song reached its sorrowful climax, Mafuyu felt a strange sensation in her chest. The Anemo energy she had absorbed at the statue... it hummed. It resonated with the sadness in the bard's voice.

'Forgotten...' Mafuyu thought, watching the bard's eyes. *'He sounds like he misses him.'*

Venti strummed the final chord. The wind swirled around him, lifting his cape dramatically as he bowed.

"Thank you, thank you!" Venti chirped, his sorrowful demeanor vanishing instantly into a playful grin. "If you enjoyed the performance, spare a Mora for a thirsty bard? Or perhaps an apple?"

The crowd clapped and dispersed. Venti began counting the few coins tossed into his hat.

"That was... quite the performance," Aether said, stepping forward.

Venti looked up. His teal eyes sparkled with recognition.

"Oh? It's you!" Venti smiled, putting his lyre away. "The Traveler who scared away the dragon! And..."

He looked past Aether, his gaze landing on the four teenagers in school uniforms. He paused, sniffing the air slightly.

"Ooh," Venti's eyes widened. "And friends from very, very far away. You smell like... distant stars. And a hint of processed sugar."

"That would be the Sticky Honey Roast," Tsukasa clarified, stepping forward and placing a hand on his chest. "Greetings, Bard! I am Tsukasa Tenma! A World Future Star! I must say, your vocal control is adequate, though your stage presence could use—"

"Tsukasa-senpai, please," Ichika nudged him back, bowing politely. "Your song... it was beautiful. You sang about the dragon as if you knew him."

Venti's smile softened. "Did I? Well, a bard knows many tales. Old and new."

He turned back to Aether, his expression turning slightly more serious. "But I suspect you didn't come here just to critique my rhyming scheme."

Aether reached into his pocket. He pulled out the crimson crystal—the **Teardrop** he had found in the woods.

"We found this," Aether said. "It's full of anger. And it looks like the crystals on Dvalin's back."

Venti looked at the crystal. "Ah. A Teardrop. A crystallized wound."

He reached out, his fingers hovering over the glowing red gem.

"He is in pain," Venti whispered, his voice losing its playful lilt. "He feels betrayed. Abandoned. The abyss mages are using that pain to twist his mind."

"Betrayed?" Mafuyu spoke up. It was the first time she had spoken directly to a stranger.

Venti looked at her. He tilted his head, seemingly fascinated by the hollow look in her eyes.

"Yes," Venti said softly. "Imagine protecting something with all your heart... only to wake up centuries later and find that the world you saved is afraid of you."

Mafuyu stared at the crystal. *Protecting something... only to be feared.* The concept felt uncomfortably familiar.

"Can we fix it?" Haruka asked, stepping into the practical role. "If this is causing his madness, can we purify it?"

"Usually, no," Venti admitted. "It contains potent corruption. A normal person would be burned just touching it." He looked at Aether. "But you... you purified it, didn't you, Traveler?"

Aether nodded. The crystal in his hand was no longer angry red; it was a clear, light blue.

"And you four..." Venti looked at the PJSK group. He walked closer to them, circling Tsukasa and Ichika. "You don't have Visions. But the wind clings to you. It likes you."

He stopped in front of Tsukasa.

"You have a loud soul," Venti laughed. "The wind finds it amusing."

"Amusing?!" Tsukasa spluttered.

"I have a plan," Venti announced, clapping his hands. "To save Dvalin, we don't need swords. We need to remind him of who he used to be. We need to summon him."

"Summon a dragon?" Paimon gulped. "How?"

"With the **Holy Lyre der Himmel**," Venti declared dramatically. "The lyre that Barbatos used in ancient times. It is kept in the Cathedral."

He pointed a finger at the massive church behind them.

"It is a national treasure. Surely, if we explain the situation, the church will lend it to us, right?"

"I doubt it," Haruka said skeptically. "National treasures aren't usually loaned out to street performers and strangers."

"Not with *that* attitude!" Venti winked. "Come on! Let's go ask! Maybe they're fans of my work!"

He skipped off toward the Cathedral.

"He is... surprisingly energetic," Ichika noted.

"He's suspicious," Aether muttered, though he followed.

"He lacks discipline!" Tsukasa critiqued. "But he has spirit! I shall observe his methods!"

As they walked toward the Cathedral, Mafuyu lingered for a second, looking at the statue of the Archon. The statue looked remarkably like the bard who had just sung for an apple.

‘He hides it well,’ Mafuyu thought, turning to follow them. *‘The mask.’*

Chapter 17: Chapter 12: The Heist

Location: Mondstadt Cathedral (Entrance)

"They threw me out!"

Venti burst through the massive oak doors of the Cathedral, looking less like a god and more like a pouting child. He skipped down the steps to where the group was hiding behind a pillar.

"They didn't want to lend the national treasure to a street performer?" Haruka asked, crossing her arms. "I am shocked."

"The Nun was very rude!" Venti huffed. "I even offered to write a ballad in her honor! She said, and I quote, *'The Holy Lyre is not a toy for drunken bards.'* Can you believe the audacity?"

Aether sighed. "So, Plan B?"

"Plan B!" Venti grinned, his demeanor shifting instantly from offended to mischievous. "If they won't lend it to us... we borrow it permanently! Tonight!"

"Theft?!" Ichika whispered, looking around nervously to see if the guards heard. "We're going to steal from a church?"

"It is a holy mission!" Venti corrected. "To save a dragon! Now, we need a stealth team."

"Leave it to me!"

Tsukasa Tenma stepped forward, flipping his coat dramatically. The long shadows of evening cast a dramatic silhouette behind him.

"I, Tsukasa Tenma, act as the phantom thief! I have played the role of a rogue in *The Phantom of the Opera House*! My stealth is impeccable! I shall slip in like a shadow and—"

"Absolutely not," Haruka said flatly.

Tsukasa froze. "Eh?"

"Tsukasa-senpai," Haruka listed off the reasons on her fingers. "One: You project your voice when you get excited. Two: You are wearing a coat that flaps in the wind. Three: You have a tendency to pose after every success."

She looked him dead in the eye.

"You are the loudest person in Teyvat. If you go in there, the Knights will catch us in five seconds."

Tsukasa opened his mouth to argue, but then he looked at Aether, who was nodding in agreement. He looked at Ichika, who looked apologetic.

"Gah...!" Tsukasa clutched his chest. "My own troupe... betraying me..."

"We need agility," Haruka continued, turning to Venti. "I have dance training. I know how to control my footsteps and balance. I'll go with Aether."

"Excellent choice!" Venti clapped. "The Idol and the Hero! A classic pairing."

"Then what is *my* role?" Tsukasa demanded, trying to salvage his dignity.

Venti pointed toward the lower district of the city, specifically a high rooftop near the tavern district.

"We need an extraction beacon. Once we jump from the Cathedral, we need to know the coast is clear near the hideout. Tsukasa, go to that high roof overlooking the market. Be our lighthouse! When you see us jump, signal us!"

"A lighthouse..." Tsukasa rubbed his chin. "A beacon of hope for the escaping heroes... The Star that guides the way..."

He struck a pose. "Very well! I accept this critical role! I shall shine so brightly you cannot miss me!"

"Please don't shine *too* brightly," Ichika muttered. "Or the guards will arrest you."

"Ichika, Paimon," Venti directed. "You wait in the shadows outside the Cathedral side door. If things go wrong, create a distraction."

"Got it!" Paimon saluted.

"Wait," Haruka realized a fatal flaw. "Aether has a wind glider. I don't. If we have to jump from the Cathedral spire... I can't fly."

"Ah, right," Aether realized. "We haven't found a glider for you yet."

"No problem!" Venti plucked a string on his lyre. A soft, turquoise light swirled around Haruka's uniform.

"Barbatos's Blessing: Featherweight."

Haruka felt her body become impossibly light. The gravity pulling at her boots seemed to vanish.

"It's a temporary spell!" Venti winked. "It won't let you fly like a bird, but if you jump, the wind will catch you like a falling leaf. Just don't flail around, okay?"

Haruka tested it, jumping slightly. She floated down in slow motion. "Incredible..."

"Alright," Aether adjusted his gloves, looking at the darkened sky. "Midnight is almost here. Let's move."

Location: Inside the Cathedral (Basement)

The Cathedral was silent, save for the echoing footsteps of the guards patrolling the upper levels.

Aether and Haruka crouched in the shadows of the basement stairwell.

"Guard pattern is simple," Haruka whispered, her eyes tracking the Knights. "Two patrols. They intersect every forty seconds. We have a ten-second window to cross the hall."

Aether looked at her, impressed. "You're good at this."

"It's just like stage blocking," Haruka replied, focused. "Memorize the positions. Don't miss your cue."

"Go."

They moved. Aether dashed silently, his boots barely making a sound. Haruka followed, moving with fluid grace. She didn't run; she glided, her steps light and precise, avoiding the squeaky floorboards she had identified earlier.

They reached the inner sanctum. The Holy Lyre der Himmel sat on a pedestal, glowing with a faint Anemo light.

"There it is," Aether whispered.

They approached the pedestal. Aether reached out his hand.

Flash.

A jagged bolt of Electro energy crackled through the air.

"Watch out!" Haruka shoved Aether aside.

A figure materialized from invisibility—a tall, masked agent of the Fatui. He snatched the Lyre from the pedestal with a gloved hand.

"The Fatui!" Aether hissed, drawing his sword.

"Signora will be pleased," the Agent sneered. He didn't stay to fight. He vanished into smoke, sprinting toward the exit.

"He's getting away!" Haruka yelled.

"INTRUDERS!" a guard shouted from the doorway. The alarm bells began to ring. *CLANG. CLANG. CLANG.*

"We've been spotted!" Aether grabbed Haruka’s arm. "We have to run! The window!"

The Escape

They sprinted through the basement, bursting out into the main hall. Guards were pouring in from the front entrance.

"This way!" Aether kicked open a side window that led to the upper balcony.

They scrambled onto the ledge. The drop was massive. The city of Mondstadt sprawled below them in the dark, but the streets were beginning to fill with torchlight as the Knights mobilized.

"Ichika! Paimon!" Haruka yelled down.

Below, in the bushes, Ichika popped up. "Haruka-chan! The guards are coming!"

"Run to the lower district!" Haruka commanded. "We're jumping!"

Aether grabbed Haruka’s hand. "Trust the wind!"

They jumped.

Aether snapped his wind glider open—blue wings catching the night air. Haruka didn't have wings, but Venti’s spell kicked in. A swirl of green energy wrapped around her, slowing her descent so she glided alongside Aether like a spirit.

"I see him!" Aether pointed.

Far below, near the tavern district, a figure was standing on a tiled rooftop.

Tsukasa Tenma was holding a lantern in each hand, waving them frantically like a human signal tower.

"OVER HERE! MY AUDIENCE! OVER HERE!" Tsukasa’s voice carried faintly over the wind.

"He's... definitely a visual marker," Haruka sighed, though she smiled with relief.

They soared over the rooftops, Ichika and Paimon sprinting through the alleyways below to meet them.

Location: Rooftops near Angel's Share

Aether and Haruka landed on the roof with a soft thud. Venti (who had seemingly materialized out of nowhere) was already there, swinging his legs over the edge next to Tsukasa.

"You failed," Venti noted cheerfully.

"Hey!" Paimon stomped the air, floating right up to Venti's face. "Why do you sound so happy about it?! And wipe that smirk off your face, you Tone-Deaf Bard! We almost got thrown in jail while you were sitting here enjoying the view!"

"Technically," Haruka interjected, landing beside them and smoothing out her skirt. She looked frustrated, her analytical mind already racing. "We didn't fail due to incompetence. We failed because of a third party."

She looked at Venti grimly.

"The Fatui stole it right in front of us."

"The Fatui..." Venti’s smile dropped instantly. "That complicates things."

"The guards are searching the streets!" Tsukasa hissed, extinguishing his lanterns. "We cannot stay here! We need a hideout!"

"I know a place," Venti pointed to the building directly beneath them. "The tavern. **Angel's Share**."

"A tavern?" Ichika climbed up the ladder to the roof, panting. "But... the Knights patrol there."

"The owner isn't fond of the Knights," Venti winked. "Come on! Before Kaeya figures out who the 'Inazuman Drifters' really are!"

Location: Angel's Share (Interior)

The door to the tavern creaked open.

It was late, and the bar was mostly empty. Standing behind the counter was a man with fiery red hair, dressed in a pristine black coat. He was wiping a glass with methodical, cold precision.

Diluc Ragnvindr.

He looked up as the group burst in—a bard, a traveler, a floating child, and four teenagers in dirty school uniforms.

Diluc’s expression didn't change. He looked at them with the enthusiasm of a man watching paint dry.

"Master Jean's 'guests'," Diluc noted, his voice flat. He looked at Venti. "And the bard. To what do I owe the pleasure of this... circus?"

"Hi, Master Diluc!" Venti chirped. "We need a place to hide! Preferably somewhere with wine!"

"Hide?" Diluc raised an eyebrow.

Before he could refuse, heavy knocking pounded on the tavern door.

"Open up! Knights of Favonius!"

Tsukasa froze. "The guards!"

"We're wanted criminals!" Paimon shrieked.

Diluc looked at the terrified teenagers. He looked at the door. Then, he let out a long, suffering sigh.

He pointed a gloved finger toward the back stairs.

"Upstairs. Second floor. Keep your mouths shut."

"Thank you!" Ichika whispered.

They scrambled up the stairs just as the front door burst open. Two knights marched in.

"Master Diluc!" the guard announced. "Have you seen a blonde traveler and... well, a very loud group of thieves pass by?"

Diluc didn't blink. He picked up another glass.

"No," Diluc lied smoothly. "I haven't seen anyone."

Chapter 18: Chapter 13: The Darknight Hero

Location: Angel's Share (Second Floor)

The heavy oak door downstairs slammed shut. The Knights were gone.

Diluc Ragnvindr walked slowly up the stairs, his boots thudding against the wood with ominous rhythm. He stopped at the top, crossing his arms as he looked at the group of fugitives huddled near the balcony.

"The Knights are gone," Diluc stated, his voice devoid of warmth. "Now. Explain why the 'Heroes of Mondstadt' are currently wanted for grand larceny."

"It was a misunderstanding!" Paimon squeaked, hiding behind Aether.

"We were trying to save the dragon!" Tsukasa declared, stepping forward. He tried to match Diluc's imposing stance but failed significantly. "Sir Bartender! You possess a burning aura! Surely you understand that sometimes a Star must break the rules to rewrite the script!"

Diluc stared at Tsukasa. "I don't care about scripts. I care about Mondstadt's safety."

He turned his gaze to Venti. "And you. The bard. You seem to be the ringleader."

"Ehe~" Venti winked. "Well, you see, Master Diluc... the story is quite tragic. Would you like to hear it in D-Major or G-Minor?"

"Plain speech," Diluc warned. "Or I hand you over to the guards myself."

"Fine, fine," Venti sighed, dropping the act. He explained everything—Dvalin's corruption, the Holy Lyre's power, and the Fatui's interference.

As Venti spoke, Haruka watched Diluc closely.

'He's calculating,' Haruka analyzed. *'He pretends to be indifferent, but he hid us. He hates the Knights, but he loves the city.'*

When Venti finished, silence filled the tavern.

"The Fatui," Diluc murmured, his eyes narrowing. "They stole the Lyre to harness its power... or destroy it. If they succeed, Dvalin is lost."

He walked over to the window, looking out at the sleeping city.

"Very well. I will help you."

"You will?" Ichika asked, surprised.

"The Knights are inefficient," Diluc scoffed. "If we leave this to them, bureaucracy will kill the dragon before the Fatui do. We need to act outside the law."

He turned back to them.

"But I cannot do this alone. I need a contact within the Knights. Someone who isn't blinded by protocol."

"Kaeya?" Tsukasa suggested. "He seemed... sneaky."

"Absolutely not," Diluc's face darkened instantly. "I have someone else in mind. Stay here. Don't move. And for Archon's sake..." He looked at Tsukasa. "Keep your voice down."

Later that Night

The tavern was closed. The lights were dimmed.

The PJSK group sat around a table on the ground floor. Venti was happily drinking a glass of dandelion wine (on Diluc's tab), while Haruka and Ichika anxiously watched the door.

Click.

The lock turned. The door opened.

Diluc entered first. "They are inside."

A second figure followed him. She wasn't wearing her blue coat or armor. She was dressed in civilian clothes—a simple white blouse and trousers. She looked tired.

It was **Jean**.

"Master Jean?!" Paimon gasped.

Jean stopped when she saw them. Her eyes widened.

"Traveler?" Jean looked at Aether, then at the four students. "And... you four? *You* were the intruders at the Cathedral?"

Tsukasa flinched, hiding behind his hands. "We can explain! It was... uh... method acting!"

"We stole it," Mafuyu said quietly from the corner. "Or... we tried to."

Jean closed her eyes, letting out a long, weary sigh. She pinched the bridge of her nose.

"I assume," Jean said, looking at Venti, "that this was your idea?"

"To save Dvalin!" Venti cheered, raising his glass.

Jean walked over to the table. She didn't look angry. She looked... relieved.

"When I heard someone tried to steal the Holy Lyre," Jean admitted, pulling out a chair and sitting down heavily. "I feared it was greed. Or the Abyss. But if it was you..."

She looked at Aether, then at Haruka and Ichika.

"Then you were trying to purify him. You were trying to save him, weren't you?"

"Yes," Haruka nodded. "But the Fatui got there first."

"The Fatui..." Jean's hands clenched into fists on the table. "They have been pressuring me to kill Dvalin. If they have the Lyre... they hold all the cards."

Mafuyu watched Jean.

She saw the slump in Jean's shoulders. The dark circles under her eyes that the dim light couldn't hide.

'She carries everything,' Mafuyu thought. *'Just like Noelle. But Noelle has hope. Jean just has... duty.'*

"Jean," Diluc spoke up from the bar, where he was pouring grape juice. "You can't handle this officially. If the Grand Master is caught working with thieves, the Fatui will have your badge."

"I know," Jean said softly. She looked up, her violet eyes burning with resolve. "That is why I am here as Jean. Not as the Grand Master."

She looked at the group.

"We must retrieve the Lyre before the Fatui can use it. Do we have a lead?"

"I have contacts," Diluc said, placing a glass of juice in front of Jean. "The Fatui have a hidden stronghold near the cliffs. My sources say they moved a 'precious artifact' there an hour ago."

"Then we raid it," Tsukasa slammed his hand on the table (gently this time). "The Teyvat Expedition Team, plus the Darknight Hero, plus the Grand Master! We are unstoppable!"

"Darknight Hero?" Diluc frowned. "Don't call me that."

"It fits!" Paimon giggled.

"We move at dawn," Jean decided, standing up. She looked at the four students. "You are civilians. You do not have to do this. You are already wanted criminals because of tonight. If you come with us..."

"We're already in," Ichika stood up, her fists clenched. "We started this. We want to finish it."

"Besides," Haruka added, smiling slightly. "We can't let the 'villains' keep the treasure, can we?"

Jean smiled—a real, genuine smile.

"Thank you," she whispered. "For fighting for Mondstadt."

Chapter 19: Chapter 14: The Shadow of the Stronghold

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Location: Hidden Fatui Stronghold (Near Springvale)

The entrance to the hideout was concealed within a jagged crevice of the cliffside, marked only by a faint elemental signature that Aether's sight picked up.

Diluc adjusted his black gloves, staring into the dark tunnel.

"Remember," Diluc said, his voice low. "Once we cross this threshold, we are not the Knights, and we are not citizens. We are shadows."

"Understood!" Tsukasa whispered loudly, pulling his collar up to cover the lower half of his face. "The Phantom Thief Persona is fully engaged!"

"Just... stay behind me," Diluc sighed.

Jean stood next to them, looking uncomfortable without her armor. She wore a simple traveler's cloak to hide her identity.

"I cannot be seen using my Anemo arts too openly," Jean warned. "If a Fatui survivor recognizes the Gunnhildr technique, it will cause a diplomatic incident."

"Leave the wind to us!" Haruka stepped forward. "We have no style to recognize. We're just... unruly gusts."

"Spoken like a true poet," Venti giggled, strumming a muted chord on his lyre. "Shall we proceed? The Holy Lyre awaits!"

The Infiltration

The interior was cold, constructed of heavy stone and Snezhnayan machinery. Fatui Skirmishers patrolled the hallways—hulking men in elemental armor.

They crouched behind a stack of crates.

"Two guards," Aether signaled. "An Electro Hammer and a Geo Chanter."

"We need a distraction," Diluc noted, reaching for his claymore. "Or I can simply—"

"Wait!" Tsukasa grabbed Diluc's arm. "Master Diluc! Violence is efficient, but deception is an art! Allow me to bluff our way past!"

Diluc looked at Tsukasa like he had grown a second head. "Bluff?"

"I am an actor!" Tsukasa declared. "I shall pretend to be a visiting dignitary!"

Before Diluc could stop him, Tsukasa marched out from behind the crates. He puffed out his chest and pointed at the guards.

"YOU THERE! SUBORDINATES!" Tsukasa bellowed, affecting a terrible, overly posh accent. "I am... Inspector Tsukasa! From the... uh... The North! I am here to inspect the Lyre! Stand aside!"

The two Fatui guards stared at him.

"Inspector?" The Electro Hammer guard grunted, towering over the boy. He looked Tsukasa up and down—at his bright, colorful clothes, his unmasked face, and his complete lack of Snezhnayan military bearing.

"You don't look like an inspector," the guard scoffed, hefting his hammer. "You look like a civilian playing dress-up. Where is your insignia?"

"It is... uh... currently being polished!" Tsukasa panicked, sweat forming on his brow. "Do you dare question the Tsaritsa's protocols?!"

The guard raised his hammer. "Intruder."

"Plan B!" Tsukasa shrieked, diving backward.

"Burn."

Diluc surged past Tsukasa, his claymore engulfed in flames. With a single, brutal swing, he smashed the Electro guard's shield. Jean moved in perfect sync, using a non-elemental thrust to knock the Geo Chanter off balance.

Within seconds, the guards were unconscious.

"Nice acting," Paimon slow-clapped.

"I bought time for the strike!" Tsukasa insisted, dusting himself off. "It was a tactical distraction!"

"Let's keep moving," Jean said, though she hid a small smile.

The Maze

Deeper in the complex, the layout became confusing. Moving platforms and elemental traps blocked the way.

"This architecture makes no sense," Ichika muttered, looking at a floating platform. "Why put a flamethrower in a hallway?"

"To deter guests," Haruka answered plainly.

She watched the fire traps spewing flames in a set pattern. *Fwoosh. Pause. Fwoosh.*

"It’s a rhythm," Haruka analyzed. "Three seconds on. Two seconds off. We move on the off-beat. Ichika, Mafuyu, stick close to me."

Haruka took point. "And... *move*."

She dashed through the trap. Ichika followed. Mafuyu hesitated, staring at the fire.

"Mafuyu!" Amber (who wasn't there, but her voice echoed in Mafuyu’s head) would have yelled.

Mafuyu took a breath. She didn't run; she let the Anemo power surge.

"Void Step."

She dashed forward, a burst of cold wind propelling her faster than humanly possible. She cleared the trap with a second to spare.

"Whoa," Paimon blinked. "Mafuyu is fast!"

"I just... wanted to be on the other side," Mafuyu murmured.

Jean watched Mafuyu closely. She saw the precision. The lack of wasted movement.

"You have excellent control," Jean complimented her softly. "But you hold your breath when you move. You must remember to breathe, or you will faint."

Mafuyu looked at Jean. The Acting Grand Master—the symbol of perfection—was giving her advice.

"Yes, Grand Master," Mafuyu said instinctively.

"Jean," Jean corrected gently. "In here, I am just Jean."

The Inner Sanctum

They reached the final room. The Holy Lyre der Himmel sat suspended in a containment field in the center of a large arena.

But it wasn't unguarded.

A tall woman in purple robes floated in the air, surrounded by three small, buzzing Electro Cicins (bats). An **Electro Cicin Mage**.

"My, my," the Mage giggled, her voice distorted by her mask. "More little mice coming to play? And you brought... children?"

She pointed a clawed finger at the four students huddled near the entrance.

"Leave the children out of this," Diluc growled, igniting his blade.

"Oh, but they look so... shockable!"

The Mage raised her lantern. *ZZAAPP.*

A massive bolt of lightning arched toward Haruka.

"Haruka-chan!" Ichika screamed.

Ichika didn't have a sword. She didn't have a shield. But she had the desire to protect.

She threw her hands up. The Anemo energy inside her didn't swirl; it solidified. A wall of compressed wind formed in front of Haruka.

BOOM.

The lightning hit the wind wall and scattered harmlessly.

"A barrier?" The Mage tilted her head. "How annoying."

"Now!" Aether yelled.

The team sprang into action.

- **Diluc** charged the center, his Pyro claymore clashing with the Mage’s Electro shield.
- **Jean** flanked left, using her wind to pull the annoying Cicins out of the air.
- **Tsukasa** ran to the right. "HEY! OVER HERE! LIGHTNING LADY!" He unleashed a chaotic blast of wind that messed up the Mage’s floating trajectory.
- **Venti** stood in the back, playing a battle tune. "Go team! Hit the lantern!"

"Mafuyu! Haruka!" Aether commanded. "The cage!"

While the heavy hitters distracted the Mage, Haruka and Mafuyu ran for the containment field holding the Lyre.

"It’s locked," Haruka analyzed the mechanism. "Four keyholes. We need the key."

"No," Mafuyu whispered. She placed her hand on the lock. She felt the wind. Wind could erode rock. Wind could slip through cracks.

"We don't need a key," Mafuyu said.

She channeled her Anemo power into the lock mechanism. It wasn't a blast; it was a high-pressure injection of air.

Click. Click. SNAP.

The lock shattered from the internal pressure. The cage lowered.

"Grab it!" Haruka yelled.

Mafuyu snatched the Holy Lyre.

"THEY HAVE THE PRIZE!" the Mage shrieked, trying to disengage from Diluc.

"I think not," Diluc stated calmly.

"Dawn."

A massive fire phoenix erupted from Diluc's blade, consuming the Mage and blasting her into the far wall. The impact shook the entire dungeon.

"Retreat!" Jean ordered. "We have what we came for!"

The Escape

They sprinted out of the stronghold, bursting back into the cool night air of Mondstadt.

They didn't stop running until they reached the cover of the woods.

"We... *huff*... we did it," Tsukasa panted, leaning against a tree. "The Star... triumphs again."

Jean looked at the Holy Lyre in Mafuyu's hands. It glowed faintly, though the energy felt weaker than in the stories.

"The Holy Lyre der Himmel," Jean breathed, touching the wood reverently. "We actually retrieved it."

"And nobody saw us!" Paimon cheered. "Except the guys we beat up!"

"Good work," Diluc nodded, though he was looking at Ichika. "That barrier... it was sturdy. You have good instincts."

Ichika blushed, looking at her hands. "I just... didn't want Haruka to get hurt."

"And Mafuyu," Venti floated over, looking at the lock-picking hand. "You picked a Fatui lock with brute-force wind? How... delightfully violent!"

Mafuyu looked at the Lyre. "It was in the way."

"Now," Aether said, looking at the Lyre. "We have the instrument. But Venti said it needs to be purified before we can use it to summon Dvalin."

"That's right!" Venti took the Lyre. He frowned. "Oof. It's definitely seen better days. The Anemo power has almost run dry. It's more like the 'Holy Lyre of... Meh' right now."

"Can you fix it?" Haruka asked.

"Me? No," Venti shrugged. "But... *we* can. With a little help from the Traveler's purifying Teardrops."

He looked at the group.

"Let's head back to the Winery," Diluc suggested. "It’s safer than the city right now. We can plan the summoning ritual there."

"Sleepover at the rich guy's house!" Paimon cheered.

As they began the trek to the Dawn Winery, Jean fell into step beside the exhausted students.

"You fought bravely," Jean said softly, so only they could hear. "Thank you. For protecting my city."

"It's not our city," Mafuyu replied automatically.

Jean smiled sadly. "Perhaps not. But you protected it all the same."

Chapter End Notes

For people thinking that there's an IchiHaruka moment, no.

again, no parings for Haruka for now

Chapter 20: Chapter 15: The Teardrop Crystal

Location: Dawn Winery

The group arrived at the Dawn Winery under the cover of darkness. The massive estate stood silent amidst the vineyards, warm light spilling from its windows.

"Whoa," Tsukasa gasped, forgetting his exhaustion for a moment. He spun around, taking in the architecture. "This is... magnificent! It is a mansion fit for a Star! Master Diluc, are you secretly a prince?"

"I'm a winemaker," Diluc muttered, pushing the heavy double doors open. "And keep your voice down. The staff are asleep."

"Welcome home, Master Diluc," a maid—Adelinde—appeared almost instantly, bowing politely. She didn't even blink at the sight of the ragtag troupe, the floating child, or the Acting Grand Master in civilian clothes. "Shall I prepare refreshments?"

"Just grape juice. And secure the perimeter," Diluc ordered. "We are not to be disturbed."

They moved to the main hall. Aether placed the **Holy Lyre der Himmel** on the central table. It sat there, dull and cracked, its wood splintering.

"It looks... dead," Ichika whispered.

"It is," Venti sighed, running a finger over a broken string. "Its Anemo power has faded. In this state, playing it would sound like a dying hilichurl. It won't reach Dvalin."

"So we stole a paperweight?" Haruka asked, crossing her arms.

"Not quite!" Venti turned to Aether. "Traveler, do you still have that **Teardrop Crystal** you purified in the woods? And the ones from the temples?"

Aether nodded. He reached into his inventory (a subspace pocket that Paimon helpfully managed) and pulled out three glowing crystals. They pulsed with a clear, turquoise light—the anger and corruption having been cleansed by Aether's touch earlier.

"Perfect!" Venti clapped. "These crystals contain pure Anemo energy. If we fuse them with the Lyre, we might be able to jumpstart its heart."

"Do it," Jean commanded softly.

Aether stepped forward. He held the purified crystal over the Lyre.

Drop.

The crystal liquefied as it touched the wood, seeping into the grain.

Hummmm.

A low, resonant sound filled the room. The cracks in the wood began to seal. The dull brown finish shimmered, turning a vibrant, healthy gold. A wind stirred in the closed room, ruffling Mafuyu’s hair.

"It works," Mafuyu noted, her eyes widening slightly. "The song... it’s coming back."

"One more!" Venti cheered.

Aether applied the remaining crystals. With each drop, the Lyre grew brighter, until it hummed with a power that made the air feel electric.

"It is restored," Venti declared, strumming a chord. The sound was rich, powerful, and echoed with ancient magic. "Not fully, but enough to summon a dragon!"

"Excellent," Diluc nodded. "Then we move to—"

Clap. Clap. Clap.

The sound of slow, sarcastic applause came from the upper balcony stairs.

The group froze. Jean went pale.

"Bravo," a smooth voice drawled. "Grand larceny, secret alliances, and ancient magic. I must say, Master Diluc, your dinner parties have certainly improved."

Kaeya Alberich walked down the stairs, twirling a coin in his fingers. He wore his usual eyepatch and a smirk that could cut glass.

"Kaeya?!" Paimon shrieked. "How long have you been there?!"

"Long enough," Kaeya chuckled, stopping at the bottom of the stairs. He looked at the room.

He looked at Aether (Wanted Criminal). He looked at the troupe (Wanted Accomplices). He looked at Diluc (His estranged brother). And finally, his eye landed on Jean.

"Acting Grand Master," Kaeya said, mocking a bow. "Or should I say... 'The Darknight Hero's Sidekick'? I noticed you were missing from your office. The paperwork is piling up, you know."

Jean straightened up, regaining her composure instantly. "Captain Kaeya. This is... a covert operation. For the safety of Mondstadt."

"Of course, of course," Kaeya waved a hand dismissively. He walked over to the table, inspecting the Holy Lyre. "So, this is the prize everyone is chasing. The Fatui are turning the city upside down looking for it. And here it is, sitting on my brother's coffee table."

"Are you going to arrest us?" Ichika asked, stepping closer to Haruka.

Kaeya looked at her. He saw the tension in her shoulders.

"Arrest you?" Kaeya laughed. "And ruin the show? I think not."

He leaned against the table, his expression turning serious for a fraction of a second.

"The Knights are compromised by bureaucracy. The Fatui are watching our every move. If Jean tried to do this officially, the diplomats would block her."

He looked at Diluc.

"I wondered why you were so quiet lately. It seems you found a solution that doesn't involve paperwork."

"We are going to save Dvalin," Diluc stated coldly. "Are you going to stand in our way?"

"On the contrary," Kaeya smirked. "I'm here to ensure you aren't interrupted. I've sent the patrol guards on a wild goose chase toward Springvale. You should have a clear path to the north."

He turned to the troupe.

"And you four," Kaeya's eye glinted. "Drifters from 'far away' participating in treason against the state. You certainly adapt quickly."

"We are merely..." Tsukasa started, sweating.

"Helping friends," Mafuyu finished quietly.

Kaeya paused. He looked at Mafuyu—the girl who looked like she was made of glass.

"Friends," Kaeya repeated, the word tasting strange in his mouth. He glanced at Diluc, then looked away. "Well. Good luck with your... song."

He pushed off the table and headed for the door.

"Oh, and Jean?" Kaeya called back. "Try to be back by morning. Lisa is running out of excuses for your absence."

The door clicked shut.

"He knew," Haruka exhaled, leaning against the wall. "He knew the whole time."

"That is Kaeya," Diluc scowled. "He always knows more than he says."

"But he's on our side!" Paimon cheered. "Kinda!"

"We have the Lyre," Venti strummed the instrument, bringing the focus back to the mission. "And thanks to the Traveler's crystals, it is reawakened."

"Where do we summon him?" Aether asked. "We need a high place. Somewhere the wind is strong."

Venti pointed north.

"**Starsnatch Cliff**," Venti said. "It overlooks the ocean. The wind there is wild and free. It’s the perfect stage for a reunion."

"Starsnatch Cliff..." Tsukasa repeated, his eyes lighting up. "A cliffside stage? Under the stars? A perfect venue for a World Future Star!"

"Then we rest for a few hours," Jean commanded. "We move at first light."

Chapter 21: Chapter 16: A Song for the Dragon

Location: Starsnatch Cliff

The sun had not yet risen, but the sky was bleeding into a pale, bruised purple. The wind on Starsnatch Cliff was fierce, whipping hair and clothes with biting chill.

The group stood at the edge of the precipice, looking out over the endless ocean.

"This location..." Tsukasa murmured, stepping to the very edge. He spread his arms, embracing the wind. "The acoustics of the open sea... the natural spotlight of the dawn... Venti, you have an excellent eye for set design!"

"Ehe, thank you!" Venti grinned, though his hands gripped the Holy Lyre tightly. "I told you, a bard knows the best spots."

Jean stood a few paces back, her hand resting on the hilt of her sword. She looked anxious. "The wind is turbulent today. Dvalin is close."

"Let us begin," Diluc said, crossing his arms. "Before any uninvited guests arrive."

"Right." Venti stepped forward. He closed his eyes, taking a deep breath of the salty air.

He strummed the Lyre.

It wasn't a loud sound, yet it cut through the roaring wind instantly. The Anemo energy, boosted by the Traveler's crystals, pulsed outward in a visible ring of turquoise light.

Ichika watched, mesmerized. *'It's not just music,'* she realized. *'It's a call. A signal.'*

Venti began to sing. It was a song without words, a melody that sounded like old memories—flying through clouds, sleeping in meadows, a freedom that tasted like apples and wine.

For a long minute, nothing happened.

Then, the clouds above them swirled.

A massive shadow descended. Blue scales glittered in the dawn light. Six wings beat against the air, generating a gale that forced the group to brace themselves.

Dvalin had arrived.

He didn't attack. He hovered before the cliff, his massive eyes fixed on the small figure in green. The corrupted blood clots on his back pulsed with an angry red light, but his gaze was clear.

"Barbatos?" the dragon's voice rumbled, vibrating in their chests.

"It has been a while, old friend," Venti said softly, not stopping his playing. "I see you remember my song."

"Why..." Dvalin lowered his head, his voice thick with pain. **"Why have you come? To mock my fall?"**

"No," Venti shook his head. "To bring you home. To heal the poison."

The melody grew stronger. The Anemo light from the Lyre reached out, wrapping around Dvalin like a gentle ribbon. The red pulsing on the dragon's back began to slow. The tension in Dvalin's posture eased.

"It's working," Haruka whispered, hardly daring to breathe.

Mafuyu watched the dragon. She saw the hesitation in the creature's eyes.

'He wants to trust him,' Mafuyu thought. *'He wants to believe that he hasn't been abandoned.'*

It was a beautiful, fragile moment. A bridge being rebuilt across centuries of silence.

CRACK.

A jagged bolt of ice shattered the air.

It came from nowhere—a precision strike aimed not at Dvalin, but at the Lyre.

"Venti!" Aether yelled.

Venti flinched, leaping back just as the ice bolt slammed into the ground where he had been standing. The melody broke. The connection snapped.

"ROAR!"

Dvalin recoiled, shrieking in pain as the abrupt severance of the healing magic caused the corruption to flare violently.

"Behold!" a screeching, mocking voice echoed from the rocks above.

A **Cryo Abyss Mage** materialized, floating in the air, cackling wildly. "Look at him! The great Dragon of the East! Betrayed again by his own God!"

"Betrayed...?" Dvalin's eyes turned from sorrow to blinding rage. He looked at Venti. Then he looked at the group behind him—Diluc with his claymore drawn, Jean with her sword, the PJSK troupe standing ready.

To the dragon's twisted mind, it didn't look like a rescue party. It looked like an ambush.

"You..." Dvalin roared, the sound shaking the cliffside. **"You brought them here to hunt me?! You use your song to lure me into a trap?!"**

"No!" Venti shouted, reaching out. "Dvalin, listen to me! It's the Abyss Mage! He's deceiving you!"

"Don't listen to him!" the Abyss Mage taunted, firing icicles at the group. "He abandoned you for centuries! And now he brings the Knights to finish the job! Destroy them! Destroy Mondstadt!"

"Defend the bard!" Jean ordered, charging forward to deflect the icicles.

"Tsukasa! Haruka!" Aether commanded. "Cover fire!"

"Understood!" Tsukasa yelled, though his voice wavered. "Hey! You floating popsicle! Pick on someone your own size!"

Tsukasa blasted a wave of wind at the Abyss Mage, trying to knock it out of the air. Haruka and Ichika moved to shield Venti.

But it was too late. The damage was done.

Dvalin reared back, gathering wind in his maw.

"GRAAAAAH!"

He unleashed a shockwave of Anemo energy. It wasn't an attack; it was a rejection. The force of the blast knocked everyone off their feet. The Holy Lyre flew from Venti's hand, clattering against the rocks.

"These people... they hunt me!" Dvalin screamed, his voice breaking. **"And you... Barbatos... you are with them!"**

"Dvalin!" Venti cried out, tears welling in his eyes.

The dragon didn't listen. With a final, hateful glare, Dvalin turned and beat his wings. He shot into the sky, creating a vacuum that nearly pulled the Abyss Mage with him.

"I will not be deceived again!"

The dragon vanished into the storm clouds, heading west.

The Abyss Mage cackled, fading into invisibility. "Hahaha! The bond is broken! The Dragon serves the Abyss now!"

The Aftermath

Silence returned to Starsnatch Cliff.

Venti knelt on the grass, picking up the Holy Lyre. It was silent. The golden glow was gone.

"He's gone," Venti whispered.

Tsukasa sat up, rubbing his head. "That... did not go according to the script."

"We were so close," Ichika said, her hands trembling. "He was listening. I felt it."

"The Abyss Order," Diluc growled, sheathing his claymore with unnecessary force. "They were waiting for us. They knew we would try to purify him."

Jean looked at the horizon where the dragon had vanished. She looked devastated. "We failed. And now... he hates us more than ever."

Mafuyu stood at the edge of the cliff, looking down at the churning waves below.

'Betrayed,' Mafuyu thought. The dragon's words echoed in her mind. *'You used your song to lure me into a trap.'*

She looked at Venti, who looked smaller and sadder than she had ever seen him.

"He didn't trust you," Mafuyu said quietly.

Venti looked up at her.

"Because he was hurt," Mafuyu continued, her voice devoid of emotion, stating a fact she understood intimately. "When you are hurt for that long... kindness looks like a trap."

Venti stared at her. Then, he let out a shaky sigh.

"You're right," Venti admitted. "I... I was away for too long. I can't just play a song and expect him to forget centuries of pain."

He stood up, dusting off his knees. The playful bard mask was gone. In its place was something ancient and determined.

"He went to **Stormterror's Lair**," Venti said, pointing west toward the ruins of Old Mondstadt. "His ancient home. If we want to save him... we have to go there. We have to break the corruption by force."

"By force?" Haruka asked. "You mean fight him?"

"We fight the poison," Venti corrected. "Not the dragon."

Aether stepped forward, placing a hand on Venti's shoulder. "We're with you."

"Yeah!" Paimon nodded vigorously. "We're not giving up on Dvalin!"

Tsukasa stood up, adjusting his coat. He looked at the group—battered, tired, but not beaten.

"A tragedy in the second act merely sets the stage for a triumphant finale!" Tsukasa declared. "We shall storm this lair! We shall defeat the Abyss! And we shall give this story the happy ending it deserves!"

"Stormterror’s Lair is surrounded by a wind barrier," Jean warned. "It will not be easy to enter."

"Then we break it," Diluc said simply.

Jean nodded. "Let us return to the Winery to resupply. Then... we march on the Lair."

As they began the long walk down the cliff, Mafuyu walked beside Venti.

"You still want to save him," Mafuyu noted. "Even after he tried to kill you."

Venti smiled. It was a sad, fragile smile.

"He's my friend," Venti said. "No matter what he becomes... he's still Dvalin."

Mafuyu looked at the ground. *Unconditional love.* Another concept that felt alien to her.

"I see," was all she said.

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